

■ Catherine R. Rhodes   
 University of New Mexico  
 rhodesc@unm.edu

## Dually Authenticated and Doubly Modern: Institutionalizing *jach maaya* in the Yucatan Today

### Abstract

*Linguistic purist ideologies circulate widely on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. Yucatec Maya speakers differentiate a “pure,” “authentic” Maya located in the past from a “mixed,” “corrupted” Maya located in the present. Today, the ideologically “pure,” “authentic” Maya of the past, is gaining a new center of authenticity in the present through its increasing institutionalization. This project is doubly modern in its temporal rupture, which engages the past as authentic and enduring, and rupture with society, which rejects vernacular Maya for institutionally authoritative language practices, produced largely through the science of linguistics. Authenticating *jach maaya* today through increased institutionalization holds implications for Maya speakers’ livelihoods, vernacular language practices, and understandings of Maya-ness, as well as for the future of these. [linguistic purism, institutionalization, language ideologies, Yucatec Maya, *jach maaya*]*

### Introduction

While language contact existed long before, linguistic purism is at least as old as colonialism on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. Described the world over, linguistic purism is about more than policing linguistic codes—it is about social differentiation. Highlighting linguistic differences can highlight social differences; minimizing the former can minimize the latter. For example, in Guatemala, where over 20 Mayan languages are spoken, Romero (2012, E32) found that “local dialects” can serve as “ethnic markers”; among Q’eqchi’ speakers, minimizing dialectal difference “marks positive alignment vis-à-vis interlocutors with a different ethnic identification.” In the Mexican state of Oaxaca, Falconi (2016) also documents how linguistic variation in Zapotec (which has multiple varieties, perhaps between 25 and 40) marks social, including ethnic, differentiation of speakers, something that changes in diaspora. On the Yucatan peninsula, only one Mayan language, Yucatec Maya, is spoken, along with Spanish. Given this, linguistic differentiation in Yucatec Maya (hereinafter *Maya*, for the name [*maaya*] its speakers give it) focuses heavily on Spanish language influences, making discourses of linguistic purism central to and even hegemonic among contemporary *Maya* language fortification efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly and popular discourses highlight differences between two registers of *Maya*, *jach maaya* /hač maya/,<sup>2</sup> understood as “pure” and “authentic,” and *xe’ek’*

*maaya /še'ek' maya/*,<sup>3</sup> understood as a “mixed” variety. Today, as the Maya language is becoming increasingly institutionalized on the peninsula, *jach maaya* is coming to refer to the language practices of a segment of the population not historically associated with *jach maaya*. Widely associated with rural Maya lifeways and how the language was spoken in the past, before it was “corrupted” by Spanish, today *jach maaya* can refer to the language practices of young, bilingual, college-educated people in urban and institutional settings. This is significant because it lends *jach maaya* a new center of authenticity.

*Jach maaya*'s perceived authenticity is grounded in its imagined locus in a past of pre-Spanish-language contact. It stands in stark contrast to vernacular Maya, which readily incorporates and Mayanizes Spanish-origin linguistic forms. It is not vernacular Maya that is becoming increasingly institutionalized; instead, institutions are using a purified—*jach*—form of Maya. When institutionalized Maya is referred to as *jach maaya*, it grounds the authenticity of this ideologically enregistered phenomena in the perceived-to-be linguistically pure past *and* institutionally authoritative present. Through institutionalization, *jach maaya* is coming to be associated with a new group of people—college educated, institutionally affiliated, Maya-Spanish-speaking bilinguals. Because access to *jach maaya* is unequally distributed among Maya speakers, attending to how *jach maaya* is becoming associated with vastly different social actors is important because understandings of *jach maaya* hold implications for understandings of Maya-ness in the contemporary peninsular context. As “speaking Maya is being directly tied to ideas about what it means to *be* Maya” (Rhodes & Bloechl 2020, 863), speaking what is perceived to be a purer form of Maya may have implications for claims to authentic Maya-ness. Thus, I ask, as Maya linguistic purism becomes increasingly institutionally entrenched and authoritative, what might this mean for understandings of Maya-ness?

### Ethnographic Context

Some 30 Mayan languages are spoken in Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, and Honduras, with extreme linguistic diversity and contact in some areas. In parts of Belize and in the Mexican states of Campeche, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco, (Yucatec) Maya is spoken (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015). With around 800,000 speakers in Mexico, constituting approximately 20% of the Yucatan peninsula's population,<sup>4</sup> Maya constitutes the most geographically contiguous population of speakers of any Indigenous language in Mexico (Lewis 2009).<sup>5</sup> It is considered to be the second or third most widely spoken language in the country (INALI 2008; “La Maya” 2018).<sup>6</sup>

Maya contains regional and register variation but is considered mutually intelligible across its variants. Regional phonological, morphological, and lexical differences in spoken Maya (Pfeiler and Hofling 2006) include variations in pluralization, word choice, contraction, and first-person plural. The two widely recognized registers of Maya—*jach maaya* and *xe'ek' maaya*—cut across these regional variants, further ideologically enregistering social and linguistic differentiation in Maya. Today, through increasing institutionalization, *jach maaya* is coming to refer to new social and linguistic phenomena, magnifying its ability to socially differentiate, particularly *vis-à-vis* the contemporary vernacular.

In 2003, a law for The General Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples was passed by the Mexican government, creating the National Institute for Indigenous Languages (INALI). The passage of this law, coming later than similar government-mandated efforts in Guatemala (1994), sparked a series of governmentally supported institutional efforts focused on the Maya language. In 2006, a university was founded in Yucatan state that offered an undergraduate program in linguistics, taught largely in Maya. This article is based on 36 months of ethnographic research between 2013 and 2018 conducted primarily through that undergraduate program.

### Linguistic Purism: From Threats to Authenticity to the Threat of Authenticity

Langer and Nesse (2012, 607) write:

There is no agreement amongst academic linguists as to what counts as linguistic purism and what does not. The principal divisions lie, on the one hand, between those for whom an attempt to rid a language of *any* undesirable elements constitutes purism and those who define it more narrowly as an attempt to rid a language only of *foreign* elements, and on the other, between those who see linguistic purism as a completely unacceptable academic activity and those who feel that purism is sometimes a subject worthy of study for academic linguists, such as with regard to the protection of regional or minority languages, or the process of standardizing and codifying a language.

At the center of linguistic purist concerns, the ability to designate an element of language as “foreign” or “undesirable” often relies upon ideological frameworks of authenticity. Such frameworks are frequently organized through the major driving factors of purist efforts, identified by Langer and Nesse (2012) as sociohistorical circumstances, language change over time, and contact between languages.

In situations of language contact, linguistic purist ideologies typically perceive a single language as the source of threat.<sup>7</sup> Swinehart (2015) illustrates this in the case of Aymara, where contact with Spanish, and not Quechua, is singled out (see also Woolard 1998 on Catalán). Purification work often highlights a language’s “unique” qualities as justification for differentiating it from the source of the perceived threat and increasing its perceived status or prestige. Thus, Langer and Nesse (2012, 612) claim that purism is “inextricably linked” to “the existence of a standard language,” whether it be in “the existence of a norm, or the perception of one.”

In the case of politically less- or nondominant languages, creating institutionally sanctioned linguistic norms is often a key step toward increasing linguistic prestige and, consequently, the prestige of the language’s users (e.g., Blommaert 2007; Fischer and Brown 1996). Often, language standardization projects locate authenticity in the past. While she emphasizes that the status of “impure” Tamil varied at different points in history and across different geographic regions, Das (2008) discusses how “[i]n early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Tamil Nadu, Jaffna, and Quebec. . . elite nationalist leaders developed standard languages from a prestigious linguistic style believed to possess ‘pure’, (i.e., unchanging), textual, and literary qualities” (3). These were contrasted with “other linguistic styles. . . depicted as vernaculars corrupted by ‘foreign’ or non-desirable languages” (Das 2008, 3). Even today, as French-English-Tamil multilingualism garners social prestige in Montreal, “some first generation Tamil elites deploy nativist ideologies of linguistic purism instead to highlight their moral status as custodians of an ancient or pure tradition” (Das 2008, 2). This association of primordality with morality and linguistic authenticity is also found in a Tamil language school in Montreal (Das 2008, 11). Thus, while ideologies about the value of purity change over time and region, ideological frameworks that locate linguistic purity, and hence authenticity, in the past are often enduring, at least for certain segments of language users and particularly under institutionalization.

Locating authenticity is a deeply ideological project. Garrett (2000, 70) describes this in St. Lucia, where efforts to “authenticate” and “purify” Kwéyòl, creating a ‘high’ form, rest in re-lexicalizing the language through what are perceived to be French lexical forms; however, these efforts are increasingly anglicizing “high” Kwéyòl, despite lack of awareness of these effects from “developers and speakers.” In this context, it is less about the structural influence of English on Kwéyòl than it is about speakers’ perception that “high” Kwéyòl is a less Anglicized and more Francophone-ized version of the language. As the linguistic purism literature shows, these perceptions lie largely in the realm of users’ lexical awareness (see Silverstein 1981), which of course is tied to the lexical items’ social-indexical values.

For instance, supporting Langer and Nesse's (2012) claim that linguistic purism is a sociological phenomenon, often driven by sociohistorical circumstances, French (2010, 35) points out that the work of legitimizing and strengthening a Mayan language is about more than the language itself: "...standardization is implicitly linked to an ideology of purism that is presumed to strengthen the Maya nation." According to French's (2010, 37) Kaqchikel-speaking interlocutors, this work of creating a unified nation of Maya peoples is grounded in a pre-Columbian past. Others, too, have indicated that purified linguistic standards can contribute to the creation of Maya cultural identity (Brown 1996; England 1996; Maxwell 1996). Barrett (2008, 278) documents this among Sipakapense-speaking children who use purism "to index both youth identity and adherence to the political and social ideologies of the Maya movement." Pérez Moreno (2019) shows how purifying Lacandón of Spanish serves as a decolonizing project; Swinehart (2015) makes a related argument for Aymara. Whether understood as essentialist or as an example of cultural revitalization and sovereignty (Rappaport 2005), such projects rely upon modern ideological frameworks that dichotomize the past as authentic and enduring and the present as corrupted and fleeting (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Latour 1993).

Ideologies of linguistic purism are not found in all contemporary Mayan-speaking communities (French 2010; see also Brody 2004; Choi 2003; Reynolds 2002; Richards 1998), but concerns described in broader contexts of linguistic purism are found in Mayan language contexts, including a pervasive reliance on framing language and other cultural forms through modern ideological terms. Theoretical understandings of modernity vary, but most are built upon dichotomies (e.g., past/present-future, traditional/modern, society/science) and time. "Modern," following Latour (1993, 11), represents a temporal rupture, "a new regime, an acceleration" that is contrasted with the "archaic and stable past." This temporal rupture is premised upon two processes: the construction of "two entirely distinct ontological zones...human beings [and] nonhumans" through processes of "purification," and the creation of "hybrids of nature and culture" through processes of "translation" (Latour 1993, 10–11). Purification is central to the work of the moderns and constructing hybrids is central to the work of the nonmoderns. While Bauman and Briggs (2003) critique Latour's (1993) treatment of language *as modern*, his articulation of modern ideologies is particularly apropos to Maya language purification projects, as these also frame language in a modern way.

A particular goal of linguistic purification (the Latourian sense of the term applies here) is increased authority and legitimacy of languages. In the case of Mayan languages, this is typically vis-à-vis Spanish and is often achieved through institutionalization, as institutions serve as sites for authorizing expert knowledge and individuals (see Muehleman 2013).<sup>8</sup> Carr (2010, 19) understands "expertise as intensively citational institutional action, rather than as a powerful cache of individual knowledge that is simply expressed in social interaction." This relates directly to other concerns for Maya language fortification—who can appropriately engage in language purification as part of fortification practices and how should these be carried out?

Purist linguistic practices vary in their framing and ends, given the sociocultural positionalities of their propagators (Fischer and Brown 1996). While historically associated with "educated elites," linguistic purism is not typically associated with contemporary academic linguists (Langer and Nesse 2012, 616), but such practices are popular among contemporary Maya and Native linguists within and outside of academic contexts.<sup>9</sup> Milroy (2005, 329, cited in Langer and Nesse 2012, 617), calls this "etymological" purism, and suggests that its goal is "aimed not so much at standardizing a language" but at legitimizing it "by giving it a (preferably long and glorious) history and, in some cases, moving towards restoring the language to its ancient lawful state of purity."

Ideological commitments and individuals' goals in using purist strategies must be understood within the broader sociopolitical and economic contexts within which

they occur (e.g., Das 2016; Woolard 1998). In Guatemala, for instance, North American and European linguists' approaches to understanding Mayan linguistic and sociocultural practices could be characterized as postmodern for they "focus attention on the ambiguity and the many layers of contested meanings that underlie cultural data and its collection" (Fischer and Brown 1996, 3). In contrast, native-speaking linguists of Mayan languages in Guatemala have often employed what have been characterized as (strategic?) essentialist approaches to cultural activism and linguistic fortification, including linguistic purism (Fischer and Brown 1996; see also French 2010; Hale 2002). Again, following Carr (2010, 19), "to be an expert is not only to be authorized by an institutionalized domain of knowledge or to make determinations about what is true, valid, or valuable within that domain"; expertise is also the ability to "finesse reality and animate evidence through mastery of verbal performance" (Matoesian 1999, p. 518). The examples I provide in my discussion of the institutionalization of *jach maaya* further below illustrate this clearly—individuals' abilities to participate as institutionally authorized expert interpreters and schoolteachers depends largely on their ability to perform institutionally ratified *jach maaya*.

The literature on linguistic purism documents a sustained concern with making and substantiating claims to authenticity. Institutionalized creation and authorization of a linguistic "standard" can authenticate such forms and increase their prestige and that of their users (see Meek 2012 and also Meek and Messing 2007). What remains to be seen is if the statuses of language users can be shifted in ways that challenge existing power relations through reliance upon modern frameworks of authenticity that ground the locus of authenticity in the past. The case of *jach maaya* suggests that new efforts to institutionalize Maya are creating new centers of authenticity vis-à-vis the language in the present. This new authenticity relies, at least in part, on the undifferentiation of institutionally grounded *jach maaya* with the *jach maaya* of the past. Institutionalizing a purified (*jach*) Maya in the present dually authenticates it: It remains undifferentiated from the perceived authenticity of the *jach maaya* of the past and it is authenticated through its construction as institutionally authoritative. It is also doubly modern: It engages the past as authentic and enduring—a temporal rupture in the Latourian sense—and it centers *jach maaya*'s present authenticity in institutionally authoritative knowledge frameworks grounded in science (vis-à-vis linguistics), thus creating a rupture with society (i.e., vernacular Maya), an act of Latourian purification.<sup>10</sup>

### Linguistic and Social Differentiation in Maya

#### *Recognized Linguistic Variants: Jach Maaya and Xe'ek' Maaya*

*Jach* and *xe'ek'* *maaya* are widely recognized linguistic registers of Maya (Berkley 2001; Briceño Chel 2000, 2002; Colazo-Simon 2007; Cornejo Portugal and Bellon Cárdenas 2009; Cru 2014, 2016; Gabbert 2001; Guerrettaz 2013, 2015; Hervik 2003; Pfeiler 1998; Pfeiler and Hofling 2006; Vrooman 2000). Scholars and bilingual (Maya-Spanish) speakers<sup>11</sup> refer to, identify, and differentiate between them, considering *jach maaya* as free of Spanish and *xe'ek'* *maaya* as Maya mixed with Spanish.<sup>12</sup> Briceño Chel (2002, para. 22) explains this key distinction:

The *jach maaya*, which literally means "the true maya," is considered to be the Maya language par excellence, the ancient and pure form, while the *xe'ek'*, which literally means "mixed/blended" or "jumbled/stirred up," is catalogued as a mixed variety, mesticized and with loanwords from Spanish.

Pfeiler (1998), who has written the only article specifically addressing *jach* and *xe'ek'* *maaya*, corroborates Briceño Chel's findings that "*hach maya*" is considered the pure Maya, the ancient Maya, the legitimate Maya, or the true language (see also

Barrera Vásquez 1980; Bevington 1995; Briceño Chel 2002; Gómez Navarrete 2009; Pfeiler 1991). In a section titled “linguistic facts,” Briceño Chel (2002, para. 25) writes, “among some of the distinctive characteristics is the fact that those who speak jach maaya do not use loanwords and in contrast use words that now no one uses”; he provides contemporary (“*actual*”) and ancient (“*antiguo*”) examples, with Spanish translations.<sup>13</sup> The implication is that the ancient words, no longer used today, represent jach maaya.

Listed in Table 1, the numbers provide an example of the influence of Spanish on the vernacular, what some call *xé'ek'* maaya, and the absence of Spanish-language influence on the jach maaya forms:

Bold face signals the Mayanized versions of the Spanish-origin lexical items that contrast with the archaic (jach maaya) forms. Today, the archaic forms are often unknown to contemporary speakers and not useful for everyday interactions.

Jach maaya is also characterized as entailing increased ambiguity and an element of humorous or crude speech (as reported by male ethnographers of the region—e.g., Armstrong-Fumero 2009; Berkley 1998) (see Table 2).

*Kisibche'* here replaces the Mayanized, Spanish-origin term *sìiya* but it also replaces another vernacular Maya term, *k'áanche'*. In vernacular Maya, these terms are differentiated—the first referring to a chair (four legs, of any material), the second referring to a low wooden bench (see Figure 1). In conflating these terms, *kisibche'* reduces semantic specificity. As Armstrong-Fumero (2009) reports, *kisiche'* is preferred over *kanche'* because it suggests what some consider to be a more authentically Maya way of eating—on low, wooden benches.<sup>15</sup> This is somewhat ironic because *k'áanche'* is the vernacular Maya term for the low wooden bench where people may sit to prepare and eat food. Armstrong-Fumero (2009) reports that some believe that eating in this hunched position is more traditionally Maya and more natural, as it promotes digestion, including the process of ejecting gases, hence the suggestion of the neologism *kisibche'* (lit. “wood you fart on”). This process is thought to be brought about less readily by sitting in an upright chair. Here the neologism *kisibche'* symbolically replaces the Mayanized Spanish-origin term and other vernacular Maya term and it indexes what is perceived to be a more authentic way of consuming food. As such, it points to a more ideologically authentic way of speaking and being Maya—a spoken Maya lexically purified of Spanish and a more traditional Maya lifeway, both associated with the past.

The second example, *a wix mejen* “your piss little one/offspring” also illustrates the often humorous or crude nature of jach maaya. The jach maaya described in the literature and among many contemporary speakers is widely associated with older men’s speech (e.g., Berkley 1998), a topic I find shifting in the contemporary context as jach maaya is applied to young men’s and women’s linguistic practices. The third

**Table 1**  
Numbers in vernacular and jach maaya

vernacular maaya	jach maaya
1-jun	1-jun
2-ka'a	2-ka'a
3-o'ox	3-o'ox
4-kam/kan <sup>14</sup> ; kwaatro (Sp. cuatro)	4-kam/kan
<b>5-siinko</b> (Sp. cinco)	<b>5-jo'o</b>
<b>6-seeys</b> (Sp. seis)	<b>6-wak</b>
<b>7-syeete</b> (Sp. siete)	<b>7-uuk</b>
<b>8-oocho</b> (Sp. ocho)	<b>8-waxak</b>
<b>9-nweebe</b> (Sp. nueve)	<b>9-bolon</b>
<b>10-dyes</b> (Sp. diez)	<b>10-lajun</b>

**Table 2**  
**Examples of vernacular maaya and jach maaya**

maaya	‘chair’ or ‘stool’	‘your child’	‘friend’
<b>vernacular</b>	<b>siiya</b> or <b>k’áanche’</b> (Sp. silla)	<b>a ‘iijo</b> (Sp. hijo)	<b>ámigo</b> (Sp. amigo)
<b>jach</b>	<b>kisibche’</b> (lit. ‘wood you fart on’) (Armstrong-Fumero 2009; see also Berkley 1998)	<b>a wix mejen</b> (lit. ‘your piss little one/offspring’) (Berkley 1998)	<b>‘etail</b> (lit. ‘having inherent quality of being with’) (Rhodes, Pomol Cahum, & Chan Dzul 2018)



*Figure 1.* K’áanche’ Credit: Pomol Cahum 2019 [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

example, *‘etail* “friend,” illustrates how jach maaya is often ambiguous, as copresence does not necessarily imply friendship. Other examples abound, including the use of *boxja*’ lit. “black water” for “coffee,” and *k’aab iim* lit. “liquid/juice from the teat” for “milk” (Pomol Cahum and Chan Dzul 2015). These jach maaya terms break down in use, like when discussing instant coffee or powdered or almond milk.

Jach and *xé’ek’* maaya are further differentiated based on when, where, and by whom they are used. Pfeiler writes, the “old pure Maya’ (*jach maaya t’aan*),... is the Maya that was spoken 60-70 years ago” (1991 in Hervik 2003, 28); *xé’ek’* is the modern variety used in the present (1998, 131). Guerrettaz (2013, 145) notes that bilingual education teachers placed “a heavy emphasis on learning ‘pure’ Maya as it was spoken in the past by ‘los antepasados’ (the ancestors), the Mayas who lived during pre-Hispanic times” (see also Berkley 2001; Briceno Chel 2000, 2002; Cesario 2014).<sup>16</sup>

Much like descriptions of D4 (a “well-to-do” Dublin accent) (Moore 2011) and Standard American English (Silverstein 1996), jach maaya is typically regarded as being spoken somewhere else, by someone else, never by the one who is actually speaking (Restall and Gabbert 2017; see also Collins 1998 on the “real Tolowa”). It is

not typically used to characterize one's own speech but instead the speech of others. Yet, like D4, it "is undeniably 'there' as an ideological construct... even if it is very hard to pin down with any degree of empirical certainty" (Moore 2011, 44); everyone knows about *jach maaya*, but not everyone uses it (Castañeda 2004; Cesario 2014). This elusiveness, does not, however, limit ideological articulations of where and by whom these registers are spoken (Briceño Chel's 2002, para. 23–24):

.. *jach maya* is spoken by the grandparents, the ancient or the "jach mayas" [true Mayas], the "meros mayas" [the best, most important, or pure Mayas], who live in small towns. For some people, these Mayas are found in Quintana Roo, for others in Peto, and others opine that they are "near Valladolid and its surrounds," although for others they can also be found in the areas near Uxmal and Ticul, or where the *macehuales*<sup>17</sup> ["Indian, inferior" (Bricker, Po'ot Yah, and Dzul de Po'ot 1998, 180); "Maya-speaking peasant" (Hanks 2010, 382)] are located, that is to say, in the zone of the *Cruzo'ob* [Cult of the Talking Cross; Maya resistance during the Caste War] in Quintana Roo. ...

On the other hand, the great majority opine that the mixed form is spoken in what was the *henequen* zone... in particular in the areas surrounding Merida. ...

Pfeiler (1998) similarly describes where *jach maaya* is spoken, adding only Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Q.R. (the "Maya zone") and the Chenes region in Campeche (Figure 2). These descriptions contrast the southern and eastern parts of the peninsula with Merida in terms of speakers' age, political objectives, and rurality/urbanity. The capital is framed as the seat of white, political power that has exerted the corruptive force of Spanish (linguistic and other cultural forms) on the Maya language and its users; the southeast is associated with descendants of the Caste War resistance (elaborated below), which some believe continues to this day.

### *Historical Context of Maya Linguistic and Social Differentiation*

Widely debated in the literature, the Caste War is considered to have started in 1847; end dates are cited as 1901 (Stephens 2017), 1969 (Farriss 1984), or ongoing (Reed [1964] 2001).<sup>18</sup> Key to the present discussion is that the Caste War was a response to shifts in political organization and power on the peninsula. Following Farriss (1984),

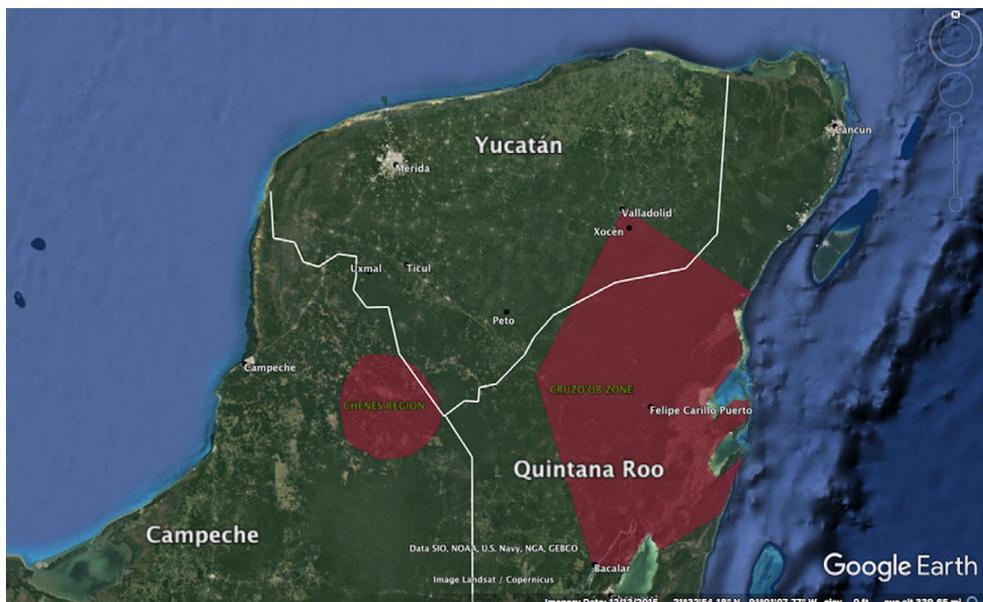


Figure 2. Map of Yucatan peninsula Credit: Germon Roche 2019 [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

as colonial reforms sought to abolish the *repúblicas de indios*, and with them hierarchical social organization, Maya nobles saw this as a further step toward undermining their social, political, and economic authority and distinction, paving the way for diminishing differentiation among Maya people. “[M]acehual,” Farriss (1984, 379) writes, “became synonymous with Indian in general, a purely ethnic category distinguishing the more or less uniform mass of Maya from the *dzuls* [non-Indians/foreigners].”

During the Caste War, in response to the needs of the resistance, argues Reed (2001 [1964]), a religious cult to the Talking Cross—the Cruzo’ob—emerged. “Cruzo’ob” became synonymous with the resistance; today many descendants self-identify as *masewalo’b* (Gabbert 2000; see also Gabbert 2019) and some young people prefer it as a self-identifier to “Maya” (Rhodes 2018). The areas dominated by the Cruzo’ob coincide with Briceño Chel’s and Pfeiler’s descriptions of where *jach maaya* is thought to be or have been spoken. This suggests that *jach maaya* may be associated, at least in part, with ideological and historical resistance to colonial and later national power (e.g., Berkley 1998).

However, it is actually suggested that the very “construct of *jach maya*... can be traced back to [the colonial period], as colonists [Franciscans] began writing grammars and dictionaries of Maya” (Guerrettaz 2013, 50). With the goal of conversion, Spanish missionaries wrote down spoken Maya using a Latin-based script, working to make written colonial Maya commensurate with Spanish (see Hanks 2010; Heath 1972). In this way, Maya was institutionalized through the church and was viewed, at times, as an empire-building tool, much as Nebrija had claimed for Spanish (Heath 1972). Given this, the notion that *jach maaya* comes from a pure, ancient, pre-Hispanic past is historically unfounded. It is precisely contact with Spanish that leads to concern about the corruption of Maya. Despite this, *jach maaya*’s association with a past free from Spanish is key to its ideological formulation.

Following Mexican independence from Spain (1821), under Benito Juárez’s direction, strong support was found for bilingual (Indigenous language and Spanish) education as a means to educating Mexican citizens (Heath 1972). However, by the time of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), it was clear that nation-building would rely upon Spanish-medium formal education (Heath 1972). Even today, many Maya speakers first encounter Spanish in school. While most communities on the peninsula have primary schools, urban areas have had longer-standing access to formal education and at higher levels. Thus, Spanish-language use is widely associated with access to schooling and increasing urbanity.

Political and historical circumstances relating to social organization, language practice and policies, and the spaces people come to inhabit all come to bear on how people ideologically construct *jach maaya*. Individuals less subjected to Spanish-language influence and colonial (later Mexican governmental) authority came to be associated with purer or more authentic ways of using Maya and, as I argue below, of being Maya. Regardless of its historical accuracy, the idea that *jach maaya* comes from a pure, ancient, pre-Hispanic past is the ideological linchpin upon which the authenticity of contemporary *jach maaya* rests. Following Briceño Chel’s (2002) description above, the term *jach* is applied to the language *and its speakers*. In both instances it is an intensifier—the really Maya (people) who speak the real Maya (language). Today, the increasing institutionalization of a purist *jach maaya* is lending it and its users a new kind of authenticity.

## Linguistic and Social Differentiation in Jach Maaya

### *Social Differentiation*

While some scholarly accounts position *jach maaya* as growing out of Franciscan missionization, it is widely described in the literature and in everyday practice as an

authentic manifestation of Maya with roots in the past. Today, however, the speech of young, urban, university-educated professionals in schools, radio broadcasts, Hollywood movies, courts, and hospitals is being referred to as *jach maaya*. These accounts contrast Briceño Chel's (2002) and Pfeiler's (1998) accounts of *jach maaya*, yet both sets of accounts stand in ideological and functional contrast to vernacular Maya. Today, *jach maaya* is becoming ideologically enregistered in contemporary institutional settings and related practices. The institutionalization of *jach maaya* has grown in prominence largely since publication of Briceño Chel and Pfeiler's texts, as Maya-language-medium higher education, written literacy, and linguistic standardization have been on the rise, largely in response to the 2003 law establishing the INALI. Indeed, most contemporary accounts of *jach maaya* are associated with institutionalized language practice (e.g., Armstrong-Fumero 2009; Berkley 2001; Cru 2016; Guerretaz 2013, 2019; Pomol Cahum and Chan Dzul 2015).

The following example, analogous to countless others recounted on the peninsula, illustrates how *jach maaya* is being used to refer to contemporary linguistic practices. In it, I exchanged words with a monolingual Maya speaker in his village; I was barely conversational in Maya at the time.

On a hot July day in Yucatan state, I chatted with a man about his village, where I was from, and his work in the *kool* ["corn field"]. An airplane flew overhead. Excited that I knew how to say airplane in Maya, I pointed and exclaimed "*¡péepén k'áak!*" I explained that I live far away—*náach*—and that I have to take a *péepén k'áak'* to get there. Pensively, the man replied that he had never been in an *áabyon* [(Sp.) "avión"; "airplane"]. He then asked, "what is this *péepén k'áak'*?" "A butterfly of fire," I responded, translating literally from Maya into Spanish. "Oh," he said, "you speak pure Maya, you who have been to university. Not like us; we don't speak *jach maaya*. We have so much Spanish in our talk." (Fieldnote120620)

If *jach maaya* is the language of the grandparents and if it points to a pure language thought to have been spoken in the past, how is it that my school-learned variety, haltingly uttered by a younger, university-educated woman in the present, could be understood as *jach maaya*?

Table 3 outlines *jach maaya* as distinct enregistered ideological formulations used for different purposes, in different times and places, and associated with users of different sociocultural, sociodemographic, geographic, and historical backgrounds who learned them in different ways. Given these differences, one could argue that they constitute distinct registers of *jach maaya*.

Both the *jach maaya* of the past and contemporary, institutionalized *jach maaya* share use of Maya archaisms/neologisms for lexical purity, degrees of contemporary unintelligibility, and a metalinguistic label, but they otherwise refer to distinct sociohistorical phenomena. Accounts of *jach maaya* that place it in the past associate it with rural, un- or minimally formally educated, monolingual Maya speakers—individuals whose livelihoods revolved around corn agriculture. Some considered it to be the way Maya people who lacked regular contact with Spanish spoke—a former, native-speaker vernacular. The idea of past linguistic purity relies upon erasure of Spanish-language incorporation into Maya, at least since the colonial era. While historically Maya had less contact with Spanish, it readily incorporated Spanish as needed (Gabbert 2001; Hanks 2010). Examples include *bakax* and *wakax* from the Spanish *vaca* "cow" (1800s) (Barrera Vásquez 1980, 27, 907) and (*ix*)*lech* (1970s), from the Spanish *lechón* "male pig" (444).<sup>19</sup>

It is true that Maya contained specialized vocabulary, much of which is rapidly falling into disuse among contemporary speakers (e.g., terms for flora and fauna; grammatical markers like numeral classifiers). Shift away from earlier forms and toward increased incorporation of Spanish terms in Maya lead some individuals today to distinguish vernacular Maya from an earlier idealized *jach maaya*. Contemporary purist forms link the past to the present as a means of making possible an imagined future. During a presentation announcing a new norm for

**Table 3**  
**Key differences between past and contemporary, institutionalized jach maaya language and users**

Jach maaya of the past	Contemporary, institutionalized jach maaya
<i>Language characteristics</i>	
Spoken in past (associated with historical vernacular)	Used in present, imagined future (not spoken as vernacular)
Spoken elsewhere	Used in copresence
Spoken by elderly; ancestors (primarily men)	Used by middle-aged; young (men and women)
Associated with violent past	Associated with hopeful future
Often crude, humorous	Not (typically) crude, humorous
Not generally associated with institutionalization	Highly institutionalized
Displays limited Spanish language contact; considered “naturally” free of Spanish	Displays great Spanish language contact; actively purges recognizable Spanish-origin lexical items
Employs archaisms (now in disuse); neologisms (invented)	Employs archaisms (recovered); neologisms (invented)
Largely unintelligible today	Largely unintelligible today
<i>User characteristics</i>	
Little/no formal education	University education (undergraduate or higher)
Do not read, write Maya	Read, write Maya (and Spanish)
Monolingual (Maya)	Bilingual (Maya-Spanish)

writing Maya, the lead author, Briceño Chel, explained that norming Maya could increase its contexts of use and extend its use to contexts previously reserved for Spanish, calling it, both a [lexical] corpus normalization and a status normalization (Briceño Chel 2014; Fieldnote141022). Berkley (2001, 351) found that language planners consider “a pure standard [Maya] the key to the cultural future.’

Ethnographic accounts from the region (Armstrong-Fumero 2009; Rhodes 2015b; Rhodes, Pomol Cahum, and Chan Dzul 2019; Bloechl 2015, 2016, 2018; Duarte Duarte 2008; Guerrettaz 2013, 2019), however, show that purging Maya of Spanish through the use of neologisms or archaisms readily renders the language unintelligible.<sup>20</sup> Text artifacts tend to more successfully approximate jach maaya than does speech.<sup>21</sup> To render intelligible these artifacts for native Maya speakers, authors introduce readers to the new terms via Spanish-language glosses (or glossaries) (e.g., Briceño Chel and Can Tec 2014; Canul Yah and Dzib Uitzil 2013). This regimentation is the work of bilinguals who possess the metalinguistic awareness to differentiate Maya and Spanish.<sup>22</sup> Advanced education requires knowing Spanish, and Spanish remains central to bilinguals’ professional activities. Further research on contemporary efforts to institutionalize jach maaya may reveal a range of (perhaps mutually unintelligible) (sub)registers of Maya as the language becomes increasingly specialized (e.g., phonetics, phonemics, law, radio technologies).<sup>23</sup>

### *Linguistic Differentiation*

Contemporary, institutionalized jach maaya differs from the ideologically constructed jach maaya of the past in its indexical value. Jach maaya of the past is imagined to be free of Spanish. Pre-Hispanic Maya surely was, but the grandparents’ Maya was not, and older speakers have been known to engage in word play, etymological inquiry, and creative neologistic productions to replace Spanish loans. Often relate to parts of the body or sexual acts, Berkley (1998: 4), following Beltran (1912 [1757]), argues that these uses of jach maaya serve as “cultural resistance” in

response to “Franciscans sermonizing in Maya.<sup>24</sup>” Contemporary regimentation of jach maaya in institutional settings contrasts with these decolonizing acts as it is largely in the service of laying stake to a claim in the nation. Today, Maya is actively purged of Spanish to imbue the language with increased prestige, often at the cost of intelligibility, and its users with increased socioeconomic access and mobility (e.g., see Blommaert 2007).

To purify one’s Maya by avoiding Spanish,<sup>25</sup> jach maaya employs the use of archaisms, neologisms<sup>26</sup> (through calquing; linguistic approximation through substitution), circumlocution, and omission. These processes are found in Tables 4 and 5, which illustrate differences between vernacular Maya and contemporary jach maaya. It is important to note that, despite—and sometimes because of (Berkley 1998, 21)—increased ambiguity or even unintelligibility achieved through these strategies, jach maaya is associated with prestige (see Guerrettaz 2013, 143; 2019).

Table 4 shows how one might say “good morning/afternoon/evening” in Maya today. I am unaware of past direct equivalents for the contemporary greetings. Much as they do today, speakers might have asked *tu’ux ka bin* “where are you going?,” *tu’ux talech* “where are you coming from?,” *bix a beel* “how are you?” (lit. “how (is) your road?”), or *bix yanilkech* “how are you (inherently)?.” Contemporary jach maaya replaces Spanish-origin lexical items by calquing from Spanish with Maya-origin terms. This extends the semantic values of the terms *ma’alo’ob* “good” and *k’iin* ‘day’ in Maya and obscures their Spanish-language origin and pragmatic values. *Bwenas* (from Spanish *buenas* “good”) holds different pragmatic value in Maya—it is used to inquire whether one may enter the property. If granted permission, upon entering the Mayanized time-appropriate greeting (*diiyas*, *taardes*, or *nooches*) is given. Efforts to purify Maya of Spanish focus on recognizable lexical items and tend to overlook semantic and pragmatic influences. An expression like *ma’alob k’iin* effectively indexes its user’s ideological stance, institutional embeddedness, and social projects—either literally or tropically (thus providing critique of these).

Table 5 shows two Maya-language proposals to avoid the Mayanized, Spanish-origin lexical item *biisi* “bike”. The first, *tz’ümin*, meant “tapir.” After arrival of the Spanish, it was extended semantically to include “horse,” which today is the vernacular Maya meaning of the term. Through metaphoric extension based on function, *tz’ümin* moves from meaning “horse” to “bicycle.” Despite its comic effect, the proposal may generate confusion. The second alternative avoids the perceived loan by describing the action of riding a bicycle. Albeit a creative circumlocution, the construction is linguistically inefficient and potentially confusing (see Rhodes, Pomol Cahum, and Chan Dzul 2018).

Neologistic constructions are not new in Maya linguistic practice, but their indexical value has shifted.<sup>29</sup> Coming from a young, university-educated, institutionally engaged user, neologistic or archaic jach maaya constructions point to the individual’s institutionally acquired expertise, which can be used to secure a socioeconomically viable future. Institutionalization of purist linguistic constructions

**Table 4**  
**“Good day/afternoon/evening” in Maya**

Contemporary jach maaya		Replaces vernacular maaya	
<b>Ma’alob k’iin</b>	Lit. “good day/sun”	<b>Diiyas</b>	from Sp. (buenos) días “(good) morning”
<b>Ma’alob chiiinil k’iin</b>	Lit. “good sunset”	<b>Taardes</b>	from Sp. (buenas) tardes “(good) afternoon”
<b>Ma’alob aak’ab</b>	Lit. “good night”	<b>Nooches</b>	from Sp. (buenas) noches “(good) evening”

Table 5  
 “Bicycle” in Maya

Contemporary jach maaya		Replaces vernacular maaya
<b>tz’iimin</b>	“bicycle”	<b>biisi</b> <sup>26</sup> from Sp. bici “bike” (short for (Ma.) bisikleeta (Sp.) bicicleta “bicycle”)
<b>ʼiinche’ balak’</b>	Lit. ‘extend stick[-like things] roll over	
<b>ka’ap’eel wóolis</b>	two round/spherical [things] <sup>27</sup>	

can sanction their users as authorized linguistic experts, codify these as “correct” practices under certain institutionalized conditions, and facilitate securing employment (see Guerretaz 2019).

Despite clear differences in their populations of users and the indexical (and communicative) value of their linguistic forms, I suggest that jach maaya remains undifferentiated as a linguistic register because differentiating it holds implications for contemporary politics of Maya language fortification efforts and ideas about “Maya-ness,” both of which rely upon modern ideological frameworks.

### Institutionalizing Jach Maaya: Motivations and Implications

#### *Making Maya Authentic Today*

The idea of jach maaya—whether it resides in the past, in the present, or in some imagined future—is always in contrast to vernacular Maya; the production of institutionally sanctioned jach maaya in the present, however, holds implications for the future of vernacular Maya and, potentially, the social identification of its speakers.<sup>30</sup>

Mentioned above, a key factor motivating increased institutionalization of Maya was the passage of the 2003 law for The General Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, resulting in the creation of the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI). The INALI was tasked with creating new writing norms for Mexico’s Indigenous languages. INALI norms for some languages display linguistic borrowing, but the norms for writing Maya, published in 2014, are guided by monoglossic language ideologies.

The *Normas de Escritura para la Lengua Maya* (“Norms for Writing the Maya Language,” hereinafter *Normas*) resulted from collaboration between the Campeche, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo state governments; the Secretariat of Public Education; and the INALI. The development team included twelve individuals from the three peninsular states who spoke and wrote Maya. The publication’s objective is for Maya speakers to have the primordial foundations in order to plan, design, elaborate, publish, teach, and spread materials in and about the Maya language (“Entregan” 2014, 1). This suggests an absence of these foundational abilities prior to the *Normas’* release, an assertion directly contradicted by Maya speakers’ activities during the past two millennia (Brody 2004, 2007), including at least 450 years of Maya language regimentation (Bevington 1995; Brody 2007; Hanks 2010).

Despite the appearance of broad inclusivity, the *Normas* largely erases variation. Created by a small segment of Maya users, the text arbitrarily selects certain variants as correct and rejects Mayanized Spanish-origin terms, despite the lead author, Briceño Chel’s, claim that written languages are a reflection of oral languages (Briceño Chel 2014; Fieldnote141022; see also Rhodes, Pomol Cahum, and Chan Dzul 2019). To make it intelligible to Maya lectors, the text includes a Maya-language glossary explaining the Maya-language neologisms and a Spanish-language version of the document with a Spanish-language glossary of the Maya terms.<sup>31</sup>

Examples abound but the following instructions on how to write Spanish-language terms under the *Normas* illustrates some key points:

... if a person comes from or was born in a town that does not have a Maya name, that name is used as it is written in Spanish but using *cursivas* [Sp. “italics”] and inside of the affixes *x-* / *-il*. (Briceño Chel and Can Tec 201, 126, emphases in original)

The first example shows how to write “I(female) am from Progreso”—*xprogre-soilen*. It marks the Maya-language morphemes (prefix *x-* “female;” suffix *-il* “inherency”) as not Maya through their italicization along with the “non-Maya” word *progreso* (Sp.). This provides a powerful counterpoint to speech practices, which Pool Balam and Le Guen (2015) show routinely Mayanize—morphologically, phonologically, and syntactically adapt—terms incorporated from Spanish into Maya. Thus, purist writing practices erase Mayanization regularly found in speech. Further, by prescribing the use of italics to signal words not of Maya origin, the *Normas* assumes Maya-language writers possess metalinguistic awareness that two distinct codes are in play, something monolingual Maya speakers typically lack. This may limit who can write Maya under these prescribed norms. The use of the Spanish-language loan (*cursivas*) in lieu of the neologism the authors employ elsewhere in the text—*ch’ebelwooj* “tilted character/letter/word”—illustrates the complexities of producing a text fully free of Spanish.

The INALI lead on the project informed me that the key advisor’s role on an Indigenous language project like the *Normas* is to create consensus and agree on one norm:

The team of native speakers decides to include the variants or not. The INALI recommends that they come up with only one norm. ... The most essential part of the project is to reach an accord. ... They arrive at an accord through discussions. [The native speakers] present how they [use the language] and the advisor teaches them the functionality of each thing and shows them the things that they use that children would find difficult to write. ... They arrive at agreements at each meeting and sign those. (Sepúlveda, phone conversation, 9/17/2015)

Such an approach enables project advisors to advocate on behalf of their linguistic preferences, but it also constrains those advisors through the expectation that there is one best answer to each linguistic item in question, privileging normativity over variation.<sup>32</sup>

Upon their release, the *Normas* were sent to all major institutions on the peninsula and institutional directors were asked to sign their acceptance into policy. During the release ceremony mentioned above, a linguist colleague from a prestigious research institute in Merida informed me that the director—a non-Maya speaker and nonlinguist—had proudly signed off on the new norms and that future institutional uses of Maya would follow them (Fieldnote141022). Nearly all major institutions on the peninsula that deal with the Maya language have adopted the *Normas* and the UNAM in Mexico City.<sup>33</sup> Given their wide institutionalization, individuals who conform to the kinds of monoglossic language ideologies espoused by the *Normas* have greater institutional access and influence (cf. Guerretaz 2019).

In 2014, the INALI also accredited the Institute for the Development of Maya Culture of the State of Yucatan to certify interpreters in the Maya language (INALI 2014; “Eligen” 2015). Eleven interpreters were certified (“Certifican” 2014). Two students from my fieldsite sat for the exam; one was certified; one was not:

... university linguistics students who sat for the certification exam later reported that it only consisted of an oral summary (i.e., not a sight translation) in Maya of a document written in Spanish. One student who was not given the interpreter’s certification commented that he was told that he used Spanish-language loanwords in his summary description in Maya. His girlfriend was evaluated after him, so he told her to avoid loans in her Maya summarization of the text. She was certified as an interpreter. Both were native Maya speakers. One of the

evaluators later commented that he was surprised that the students from [that university] “didn’t know Maya” (“no sabían maya”). (Fieldnote140828)

Not only does the INALI certify interpreters and their language practices, but it is also helping to create, in Goodwin’s (1994) terms, “professional vision” for interpreters’ language use in legal settings.<sup>34</sup> The INALI produced a legal glossary, which contributes to constructing Maya-language interpreting as a distinct kind of professional craft (Goodwin 1994). Institutions and the discursive practices they sanction, help to produce “interpretive frameworks” that allow for enactments of expertise (Carr 2010, 24, following Goodwin 1994). In the case of the INALI’s Maya-language legal glossary, the terms may have been proposed to promote uniformity among interpreters in legal contexts, but in avoiding more colloquial Maya expressions, including Mayanized Spanish-origin terms, they may preclude intelligibility or even access to the legal system given some of the terms’ cultural inappropriateness and referential foreignness (see table 6).

In the example provided, the vernacular Maya expressions are replaced by one that includes the word *ts’úis*. This word is inappropriate for use with women of any age, particularly the young or elderly. It also forms the base of the glossary’s term for “statutory rape”: *táabaj ts’úis* (lit. “trick or deceive someone into sex/copulation/fuck”), an expression that problematically conflates the use of treachery with rape. In my preliminary work on Maya language interpretation, I have heard that some newly minted interpreters believe that clients should learn the new terminology. The code of ethics of the agency that certifies interpreters (PANITLI), an arm of the INALI, says interpreters must assure that they speak the same language and linguistic variant as the assisted (INALI n.d.a.). The disjuncture between the glossary’s language and vernacular Maya raises questions about the glossary’s purpose and its role in furthering interpreters’ socioeconomic access and mobility, potentially at the cost of their clients’.

Given that institutionalized efforts to standardize and purify Maya are on the rise, it is productive to understand how contemporary, institutionalized *jach maaya* is doubly authenticated through its institutional authorization and its undifferentiation from the perceived authenticity of the *jach maaya* of the past. Others have framed *jach maaya* as both imaginary (Armstrong-Fumero 2009) and unreal (Pomol Cahum and Chan Dzul 2015). As *jach maaya* is increasingly institutionalized and sanctioned, what is at stake when the imagined becomes real? Indeed, Briceño Chel, the lead author of the *Normas*, argues that linguistic normalization/planning is a deliberate process to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, and functionality of a language (Briceño Chel 2014; Fieldnote141022).

Perhaps coming to view the contemporary project as relying both on institutional authority and the perceived authority of *jach maaya* as a more authentic way of speaking in the past may help to make explicit *jach maaya*’s ideological underpinnings, its social utility, and the ways in which the contemporary, purified version is at odds with vernacular language practice. Understanding what is at stake as *jach maaya* gains increased institutional authority is important because it holds implications for contemporary Maya speakers’ livelihoods, vernacular language practices, and understandings of Maya-ness.

**Table 6**  
**“Rape” in Maya-language legal glossary (INALI n.d.b.)**

Glossary term	Replaces vernacular maaya
<b>che’ts’úis</b> Lit. “raw/crude/hard sex/copulation/fuck”	<b>byolasyoon</b> <b>“u beeta’al u yóolal ti’ máak”</b> (Sp.) violación “rape” Lit. “to exert one’s will over another”

### *Effects of Making Maya Authentic*

In 2019, the Yucatan State Congress unanimously passed an education reform requiring schools to teach Maya at the basic (elementary) level (Ortiz 2019; “Será obligatorio” 2019). News reports indicate that the reform will eventually extend to all schooling levels through university (“Impartirían” 2020). A challenge is that not enough teachers are certified to teach in Maya. Currently, Briceño Chel is the director of a center (CECIDHY) tasked with developing a new generation of certified, bilingual, Indigenous Education teachers (“Impartirían” 2020). One of the goals of teacher training is not only for teachers to be able to speak and express themselves in Maya, but also for them to be able to understand it, read it, and write it (“Yucatán” 2020). During a recent speech at a local university, Briceño Chel, emphasized that the educational and civil institutions of the three states on the peninsula need to take action that allows for teaching Maya speakers how to write Maya and for those who know how to write, to update (“actualize”) their skills, following the *Normas* (“La lengua maya” 2019).

Elsewhere, we have argued that producing texts and other products in Maya, despite their lack of intelligibility, is extremely powerful (Rhodes, Pomol Cahum, and Chan Dzul 2018). While largely symbolic, there is also an important iconic function to the use of purified Maya. Because speaking Maya is closely associated with *being* Maya (Rhodes and Bloechl 2020; see also Jaffe 1993 and Muehlmann 2013 for related discussions), speaking what is perceived to be a pure form of Maya is associated with more authentic articulations of Maya-ness. Scholarship on linguistic purism, however, shows that it can drive disuse (Flores Farfán 1999; Hagege 2002, 2009; Hill and Hill 1986; Howard 2007). Given this, I ask, if efforts to purify Maya continue to intensify institutionally and vernacular speakers do not feel that they speak pure Maya, what might this mean for their understandings of Maya-ness?

My next example illustrates the close relationship between ideas about pure, authentic language use and authentic ways of being Maya. In Mayan language contexts, a common phonological distinction made is between /p/ and /f/ (e.g., see Pérez Moreno 2019 on Lacandón). A common ideology is that /f/ does not exist in Maya; thus, words from Spanish that use this sound are expressed using /p/. While examples of this distinction are widespread, a conversation I observed in a sociolinguistics class clearly illustrates the point (Fieldnote140115; Rhodes 2016). The topic was linguistic variation, and students and faculty were discussing how to pronounce certain terms in Maya. The term of debate was *Fab*, a popular brand of detergent whose (Spanish) name became the generic word for soap among certain segments of Maya- and Spanish-speakers on the peninsula. The students insisted upon pronouncing the term ‘paab’ in Maya because they held that /f/ did not exist in the linguistic repertoire of the grandparents. The teacher responded, *but it is in yours. So, why do you say “paab” instead of “faab”?*

The instructor was referring to the students’ desire to “correct” the /f/ in *faab* (which follows Maya vowel phonology) to /p/ when speaking Maya, resulting in *paab*. *Paab* Mayanizes the vowel and the initial consonant. The students further argued that no official Maya alphabets include /f/.<sup>35</sup> But, the instructor highlighted a key difference: The grandparents tend(ed) to be monolingual Maya speakers while the students spoke Maya and Spanish. Here, the students’ use of /p/ points to an older, more authentic and purer (one could say *jach*) form of Maya due to its perception as being less influenced by Spanish. Such associations are important as students frequently engage in practices (like bilingualism or university study) that are not widely associated with stereotypes of Maya-ness (Rhodes 2015a; 2016).

The example describes second-quarter undergraduates who were encountering linguistics concepts for the first time.<sup>36</sup> They hold language ideologies widely shared by the larger population. Aligning to the non-Spanish-influenced pronunciation allows them to align with a more recognizably Maya way of talking. This example illustrates a wider set of ideologies that associate *jach* *maaya* with “the way the

grandparents talk," mark Spanish and Maya as parsable codes, and police the perceived boundaries between these. During their undergraduate training, however, students experienced a shift in their monoglossic language ideologies, ultimately coming to adopt heteroglossic ones.<sup>37</sup>

Students also came to make explicit how ideas about language and other social practices are linked to ideas about Maya-ness. For example, Yasmín, a former student, credits university education with a shift in how she thought about herself:

*Cuando estaba en la secundaria, tenía como una crisis de identidad—me preguntaba si quería ser maya, como era, o si debía de cambiar. Me ayudó mucho el programa de lingüística y cultura maya en la [universidad] a entender que podría ser maya, como soy. Que podría estudiar y ser maya, vestirme como maya, vivir como vivo, pero también ser lingüista. Creo que esto es lo que hace para la mayoría de los alumnos. (Fieldnote140220)*

When I was in secondary school, I had sort of an identity crisis—I asked myself if I wanted to be Maya, in the way that I was, or if I should change. The Maya Linguistics and Culture program at the [university] helped me a lot to understand that I could be Maya, as I am. That I could study and be Maya, dress as a Maya person, live as I live, but also be a linguist. I think that this is what it does for most of the students.

Elsewhere (Rhodes 2016), I discuss how students claim identity work as the primary benefit of studying linguistics at university. Yet, Yasmín and her colleagues' university studies positioned them in a paradoxical situation. While their newfound heteroglossic language ideologies fostered positive realizations, including increased self-confidence; increased valorization of the Maya language and its use, often improving family relations; and even new ways of articulating and being 'Maya', they also posed challenges (Rhodes 2016). Because institutionally authoritative language ideologies are widely purist, students often found limited professional opportunities unless they tempered or avoided their nonpurist ideologies.<sup>38</sup> They and their faculty also found that stereotypes of Maya linguistic and cultural authenticity could be socially, politically, and economically productive.

### *Alternatives to Authenticity*

Discussed above, government-funded projects often rely upon stereotyped ideas of how the Maya language "should" be used; they also promote stereotypes of what "Maya" people and their activities "should" look like (see also Muehlmann 2013). For instance, Yasmín and her colleagues applied for a grant from the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples. They proposed a project in the city where their university is located and where they now teach. They were rejected for funding because a project in this city did not constitute "Maya" development. Yasmín and her colleagues reapplied the following year from a nearby village and were funded without further changes to the project. While a full discussion of diacritics of Maya-ness is beyond the scope of this article (see Rhodes 2014, 2015a, 2016), this funding decision points to how rurality, but not urbanity, is associated with Maya-ness.<sup>39</sup> Engaging stereotyped Maya-ness can be effective (see also Povinelli 1998).

The conundrum Yasmín, her colleagues, and many of the students at their university face is that, despite their heteroglossic ideas about language or new articulations and realizations of being Maya (or of rejecting this referent (Rhodes 2018)), they continue to face widespread ideologies about authentic ways to be and speak Maya, which, through their increasing institutionalization become increasingly authoritative (see Carr 2010; Bourdieu 1985).

In Guatemala, Fischer and Brown (1996) contrast some European and American scholars' views on Mayan language and other cultural activist projects with what are often characterized as the more essentialist views of local Maya scholars. On the

Yucatan peninsula one can find these distinctions, but a new middleground is emerging—one articulated by Yasmín and her colleagues. They reject linguistic and cultural essentialism and the reification of certain practices as authentically Maya. It is important to note that these resistances are coming from Maya scholars, not non-Maya scholars, as Fischer and Brown describe in Guatemala. These Maya scholars are articulating new ways of being Maya in a modern world. Yet, neither they nor I would call their new articulations *modern*, which would miss the point.

Most language revitalization/fortification work is highly modern in its reliance on ideas of the past as more authentic and the need to purify contemporary, vernacular linguistic (and other cultural) practices to increase their authenticity. Such efforts often readily and dramatically increase practices' symbolic capital in the present, at least within institutionalized contexts. They also often rely upon iconic ideas of what counts as authentic versions of said practices. Although these contemporary institutional projects produce the present as a new site for the emanation of authenticity, they remain highly modern in that they minimize and even undermine vernacular linguistic (and other cultural) practices. This may be due, at least in part, to the reality that these vernacular practices often refuse to engage in the types of distinctions (purifications) modernity requires them to make. Not limited to government-sponsored efforts, purist ideologies can also be found in radical institutional spaces. For example, the Efraín Calderón Lara Center for Social and Cultural Study and Research (CEISC) explicitly claims decolonial politics and offers Maya language classes that teach a purist—jach—version of the language (Valdovinos Alba 2019). CEISC's ideas about Maya language and culture share an ideological foundation with those of government projects—they locate authenticity in the past and reject projects that resist this distinction.

Yasmín, her colleagues, and others who share their ideas about articulating Maya-ness outside of modernity have no interest in making claims about or grounding their claims in ideas about authenticity. Possibly as a result, their activities are sometimes marked as less stereotypically Maya. By embracing heteroglossic language ideologies and using vernacular Maya for both everyday and professional projects, contemporary vernacular-Maya-speaking linguists are putting into praxis new ways of being Maya today. These are not hybrid articulations, in a Latourian (1993) sense, nor are they examples of convergence (Das 2008). Both of these assume the construction of newness from elements previously understood as incomensurate. The new articulations of Maya-ness assume a unified whole that cannot be disentangled into parts.

On the Yucatan peninsula, the question many seek to answer is if Maya linguistic and cultural practices will perdure. While projects that explicitly seek to fortify Maya appear at first blush to be the way to assure their future, a closer look suggests that the ideologies of linguistic purism, monoglossia, and cultural stereotypy at their core may in fact contribute to a shift away from such practices. As these ideologies become increasingly institutionalized, this process is likely to intensify. For this reason, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of ideologies in Maya language fortification contexts and support the institutionalization of heteroglossic ones (see Guerrettaz 2019; Jaffe 2007). In Guatemala, linguistic differentiation has been a marker of ethnic differentiation. In the Yucatan today, ethnicity is not a salient concept; instead linguistic differentiation can signal individuals' perceived association with degrees of Maya-ness. If contemporary linguistic purism serves as a marker of 'authentic' Maya-ness (be it language, cosmovision, or people) and this authenticity is produced through the reification and naturalization of the past as pure and authentic, then this may preclude the alternative realizations of Maya-ness Yasmín and others are putting into praxis. Indeed, as Lucy (1989, 2007, n.p.) writes, "...it is precisely the 'impurity' of the language that has given it such robust longevity and promises to do so for some time to come."

### Conclusion: Purism as a Threat to Maya-ness?

Linguistic purist ideologies circulate widely on the Yucatan peninsula and are pervasive in the popular imaginary. State-sanctioned, contemporary purist projects did not create these purist ideologies, but the recent increase in the institutionalization and authorization of purism vis-à-vis Maya lends them new centers of authenticity. While intending to strengthen and build symbolic capital for the Maya language, these projects also have the perhaps unintended effect of de-authenticating vernacular language practices. Contemporary linguistic purism, particularly through the creation and dissemination of an institutionalized and highly purist form of *jach maaya*, can break down communication and lead speakers to question their knowledge of their own linguistic practices and, for some, their Maya-ness. Attending to how claims to authenticity are grounded in a modern conceptualization of the Maya language and its users opens the door to showing the effects these projects have beyond the explicit regimentation of language. Alternative articulations do exist, but these are largely marginalized institutionally. Their approach rejects understanding Maya-ness through modernity and, as a result, proposes a way forward that avoids the folklorization of Maya people and their practices. By refusing to enter into the distinctions that past/present-future, primordial/cosmopolitan, native-speaker/scientist frames make, this alternative to modernity stands to redefine Maya-ness and, as such, may be the key to the future of the language.

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### Notes

1. I refer to efforts to strengthen the use of, access to, and symbolic value of Maya as fortification rather than revitalization, given that the language is already highly vital.

2. I adopt *jach* (1984 orthography) in lieu of *hach* (colonial orthography) and *maaya* in lieu of *maya*, as it better reflects pronunciation. *Jach* is an intensifier in Maya; glosses include “very,” “pure,” “true” (Barrera Vásquez 1980; Briceño 2002; Gómez Navarrete 2009; Pfeiler 1991). All translations herein are my own.

3. *Xe'ek'* (regional variant *xa'ak'an* (/ša'ak'an/)) (Berkley 2001; Pfeiler 1998)) means mixed.

4. The national population is approximately 6% Indigenous (Archibald 2014), defined primarily through language use and self-ascription.

5. When citing others, I follow their usage but avoid this term to describe my interlocutors, their language, or other cultural practices as many find it offensive and do not use it as a self-descriptor.

6. Government statistics cite Nahuatl as the most widely spoken Indigenous language in Mexico (~1.5 million speakers) (INALI 2008; INEGI 2010). However, the 2008 INALI Catalog of National Indigenous Languages identifies approximately 30 variants of Nahuatl, not all of which are considered mutually intelligible (see also “La Maya” 2018; “Existe” 2012; Hansen 2013). Because regional variation is considered not to affect mutual intelligibility in Maya, some linguists claim Maya as the most widely spoken Indigenous language in Mexico (“Fidencio Briceño” 2014; Guerretaz 2013), arguing this has not been recognized because the government views central Mexican culture as stereotypic of Mexican national culture (“La Maya” 2018). These arguments and groupings of languages and their variants are political (see Faudree 2013).

7. Linguistic purism can be found within a language (e.g., register contact). Not typically described as linguistic purism, the literature on “academic” language and related critiques of

“appropriateness” discourses (e.g., Flores and Rosa 2015) are useful for understanding how linguistic and social (particularly racial) differentiation are linked. See also Meek and Messing (2007) and Meek (2012) on how a “matrix” or “dominant” language can lend prestige to a “minority” language.

8. See Choi (2003) and Romero (2015) on K’ichee’ and French (2010) and Maxwell (1996) on Kaqchikel; cf. Cru (2016), Dorian (1994), Jaffe (2007).

9. Although linguistic formalism engages in a certain amount of linguistic purism.

10. Latour (1993, 11) argues that “modern” is...doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished.”

11. Monolingual Maya speakers typically lack awareness of the presence or origin of Spanish lexical items in Maya (cf. Hill 1985); language purity comes into question through Spanish-language contact.

12. Maya speakers most readily differentiate between *jach* and *xe’ek’* *maaya* via lexical items. Briceno identifies nominal classifier and aspect marking (terminative) differences between these two registers. Pfeiler (1996) identifies integration of Spanish morphemes and intonation into Maya. Guerretaz (2013) and Hesson (2018) call for empirical research documenting *jach* *maaya*’s linguistic features.

13. Briceno Chel’s interpretation of data in this table differs from mine and others’ below. I suspect an error in the table and imagine the following intended correspondences, which I have not verified with the author: Meesáa:Mayakche’:Mesa and K’áanche’:Xkisi’che’:Banquillo.

14. The phones [m] and [n] are free variants in absolute word-final position in Maya. Their variation does not affect semantic but can affect pragmatic value.

15. Maya contains orthographic variation (e.g., Guerretaz 2019).

16. My interlocutors did not distinguished the grandparents’ Maya from pre-Hispanic Maya.

17. Written both *masewal* and *macehual*, plural is marked with the suffix *-es* in Spanish and *-o’ob* (contracted, *-o’b*) in Maya.

18. See Bracamonte y Sosa and Lizama Quijano (2003); Farriss (1984); Gabbert (2000, 2019); Lizama Quijano (2000); Reed ([1964]2001); Stephens (2017).

19. Similar processes for creating contemporary neologisms (Rhodes, Pomol Cahum, and Chan Dzul 2018) are found in colonial Maya. The earlier Maya neologism (early to mid-1600s) for *vaca* was *kastelan keh* “Spanish deer” (Barrera Vásquez 1980, 302), an analogic circumlocution using existing Maya words, *kastelan* a Mayanization of the Spanish *Castillán* ‘Castilian’.

20. Duarte (2008) suggests that contemporary *jach* *maaya* is even difficult for *jach* *maaya* speakers of an early era (*abuelos*) to understand.

21. Berkley (2001, 351) equates *jach* *maaya* with written language; see also Guerretaz (2013, 2019).

22. See Bauman and Briggs (2003) and Kroskrity (2000) for more general discussion of regimentation.

23. Maya, like all languages, contains numerous linguistic registers, such as informal and formal (e.g., greeting elders) speech genres. Chi Canul (2015) finds styles of speaking in one community and Guerretaz (2019) different social-linguistic orders.

24. Some examples include ‘hap’*é*o *é*ó’*o*é “hair squeezer” (hat); and *š*kep *mà*askab’ “iron penis” (nail) (Berkley 1998, 4).

25. Purifying Maya of other languages, like Nahuatl, is ignored.

26. Romero (2012) describes similar tactics for creating Standard Q’eqchi’ in Guatemala.

27. *Baayka* is another vernacular form, likely derived from the English “bike.”<sup>28</sup>

28. Berkley (1998, 4) glosses this as “revolving leg stretcher.”

29. Akin to the neologism “butterfly of fire” for “airplane” mentioned above, Barrera Vásquez (1980) notes the acceptations “*tsimin k’aak*” (lit. “horse of fire”) (c. 1974) and “*wakax k’aak*” (lit. “cow of fire”) (c. 1980) for “train.” See also Berkley (1998).

30. See Field (2009), Field and Kroskrity (2009), Loether (2009), Neely and Palmer (2009), Reynolds (2009) and cf. Meek (2007) for other discussions of linguistic purism and the challenges strict adherence to it can present in language revitalization programs, along with arguments for purism’s cultural benefits (Kroskrity 1993, 1998, 2000).

31. This practice is not unique to Maya; Zimmerman (2006, 516) describes it for Guaraní in Paraguay, highlighting the irony of teaching native-language terms via another (foreign?) language, especially when this is a dominant language that revitalizationists seek to overcome.

32. Guerretaz (2019, 79) echoes this idea, emphasizing that “actual or perceived inadequacies of [language planning] projects cannot necessarily be attributed to any particular

person(s),” yet her interlocutors and mine simultaneously express “concern that some government officials promote the *normas* for their own benefit rather than for the community” (73).

33. Guerrettaz (2019) describes how the *Normas* are not the guiding standard in Maya language courses for Indigenous Education teachers and argues that variation “enables individual Maya speakers to write their language in the absence of a recognized standard” (77).

34. See also Muehlmann (2013) on the role language plays in defining Indigeneity, particularly vis-à-vis governmental institutions.

35. /f/ is not recognized in any Maya language alphabets or the *Normas*. Canul Yah and Dzib Uitzil (2013, 29) recognize it as a sound Maya speakers produce, along with /r/, when incorporating loanwords from Spanish. Some scholars fully recognize these as part of contemporary Maya speakers’ phonemic inventory (Chan Dzul, personal communication). On Maya phonemics see Barrera Vásquez (1980), Blair (1964), Canul Yah and Dzib Uitzil (2013), McQuown (1967), Rhodes (2016), and Tozzer (1921).

36. I observed analogous conversations in subsequent years, as recently as 2019.

37. During fieldwork, this was the sole institution I found promoting heteroglossic Maya language ideologies. In 2019, I discovered one faculty member elsewhere who did so as well. Guerrettaz (2019) documents *polynomie* in Maya.

38. Even the “polynomic” approaches Guerrettaz (2019) discusses preference standardization, and the *Normas* inform teacher certification exams.

39. See Shulist (2018) on Indigeneity and urbanity.

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