

**La Huasteca:
Correlations of Linguistic and Archaeological Data**

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Introduction

In modern Mexico and Guatemala there are between 2 and 2.5 million speakers of 28 Mayan languages. As a group they rank next to Quechua speakers of Peru and Ecuador as one of the most impressive surviving Amerindian linguistic and cultural units in the western hemisphere (Vogt 1969). As geography and modern distribution suggest, with the exception of the Huastecs, various Maya groups have been in contact for many centuries. Linguists generally define three major subgroups of Mayan: 1) Huastecan, 2) Yucatecan and 3) southern Mayan.

Today, Huastecan speakers are comprised of two linguistic units: 1) Veracruzano, distributed along the tropical coastlands, and 2) Potosino, spoken in the interior highlands, corresponding to the states of Veracruz, and San Luis Potosi, Mexico, respectively. Modern distribution of Huastecan speakers is represented by small, rather nucleated vestiges of Precolumbian territories:

"Only five towns in northern Veracruz and an equal number in Potosi could boast a population of 18 per cent or more Huastec-speaking inhabitants, and no town registered over 72 per cent. In 1950 the Huastec population was estimated at 56,752, of which 31,425 were in Veracruz and 25,327 were in Potosi. Only in Chinampa, Veracruz, and San Antonio, San Luis Potosi, did monolinguals outnumber bilinguals. The rapid dissolution of Huastec culture can be measured by the degree of monolingual Huastec in Veracruz during the decade 1940-50 from 9,488...to 5,677".

(Laughlin 1969:289-299)

Linguistic Investigations and Implications

The Genetic Model

Applied to languages, the genetic model assumes that people in a given group speak variations of genetically related languages, or languages which were derived from a common ancestral stock or prototype. Glottochronological comparisons by Swadesh 1953, 1961 and Gruhn 1968, and mapping of shared retentions by McQuown 1956, demonstrate lexicostatistical and relative distances between extant

Mayan languages and between the extant Mayan languages and Protomayan. Although not all researchers are in complete agreement, their results are in accord for the divergence of Huastecan from Protomayan (ca. 2200 B.C.) and the later separation of Chicomuceltecان from Huastecan (ca. A.D. 1100). The use of comparative linguistics to locate a dispersal area from where Protomayan began to radiate was undertaken by McQuown 1956 and Diebold 1960. According to both studies' results, the dispersal area was located somewhere in the Guatemalan highlands (between Guatemala City and the eastern Chiapas, Mexico border), or in the southeastern Chiapas highlands.

Migration Theory

Diebold 1960 used migration theory, originally proposed by Isidore Dyen (Vogt 1964b), to determine the most probable location of the Protomayan homeland. Migration theory (more an ex facto explanation than a method) requires knowledge of degree of relationship and distributions of languages to propose the point of origin for dispersed, but related, languages. Diebold suggested three departures from what he considered the southern highland homeland by the following: 1) the predecessors of Huastecan speakers (and the probability that they migrated north to Veracruz); 2) the predecessors of Yucatecan speakers; and 3) the predecessors of the speakers of all other Mayan language subgroups (Quichean, Mamean, Kanjobalan, Tzeltalan and Cholan).

Although Swadesh 1961 made no attempt to locate a Protomayan homeland, he inferred three relationships of importance here: 1) Huastecan and Mamean have long been separated from one another (ca. 36 centuries), 2) his Inik division (Huastecan and Chicomuceltecان) and the Yaxque subdivision (Lacandon and Yucatec Mayan) were in close contact for many centuries, and 3) this contact may have been maintained in La Huasteca rather than the southern Maya region. The latter inference does not accord well with that of Diebold's suggestion that La Huasteca was a migratory outlier from the bulk of the Mayan linguistic area. Additionally, a semantic analysis of kinship terminology in Huastecan and Yucatec Mayan speaking groups (Brown 1973) indicates the sixteenth century Yucatec Maya practiced bilateral, cross-cousin marriage and that a similar pattern occurs in the kinship terminology of the modern Huastecan speakers of Veracruz. Finally, several linguists have pointed out that Huastecan shares some phonological innovations with the Tzeltalan-Cholan subgroup and this casts doubt on the alleged antiquity of the Huastecs' separation. Gruhn, for example suggests a separation of Huastecan from the main block as late as 1000-900 B.C.:

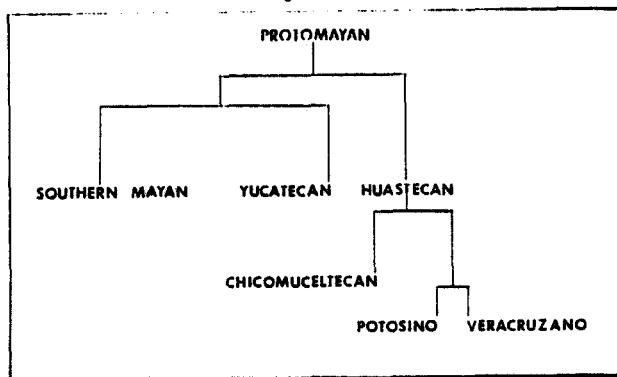
"During the early period of agricultural village life in Middle America, which is called the Preclassic period, the known archaeological cultures of the entire gulf coast region from northern Veracruz to the Peten in Guatemala were evidently closely related until around 1000 B.C."

(Gruhn 1968:210-211)

Perhaps the weakest link in the linguists' chain of explanation (Protomayan homeland - linguistic migrations - modern distribution) is the last, or most recent. The modern area inhabited by Huastecan speakers is probably greatly reduced from preconquest times. The approximate dates, frequencies, and intensities of Nahuatl and Otomi intrusions are unclear, and the impact of ancient Zoque and Totonac remains problematic.

With minor discrepancies then, it is commonly accepted that Huastecan diverged earliest from Protomayan and Yucatecan and southern Mayan separated later.

Figure 1



Schematization depicting divergence of the major Mayan language groups (Huastecan, Yucatecan and southern Mayan), separation of Chicomuceltecan from Huastecan, and division of modern Huastecan dialects.

Based on glottochronological considerations, all major subgroups must have become distinct between 2000 B.C. and A.D. 100. Again, with minor exceptions, linguistic evidence seems to indicate continuing divergence and isolation of Huastecan and later separation of Chicomuceltecan at about A.D. 1100.

Previous Correlations

Although a few linguists have speculated on the archaeological implications of linguistic data as they apply to the Huastecs and ancient Maya, these comments have been brief and confined primarily to equating linguistic divergences with generalized temporal periods (Swadesh 1953; McQuown 1956). These relied on characterization of an Early Preclassic ceramic horizon reaching from Guatemala to Veracruz (see for example MacNeish 1954:624). Others (Vogt 1964b, 1969; Gruhn 1968) viewed the Early Preclassic as a period reflecting the Huastecs' migration north to their present homeland, and the Middle Preclassic as a period of Mixe-Zoque expansion. The question remained,

however, "why the Huastec undertook the migration and ended up in a location that is far removed from the rest of the Mayan speakers" (Vogt 1964a:41).

I am aware of only a single, systematic attempt to correlate linguistic and archaeological data in the Maya area. Kaufman 1976, drawing almost exclusively on linguistic studies, and chiding archaeologists for speculating on ancient linguistic affiliations in the absence of linguistic evidence, tied together various lines of evidence to produce a linguistic corpus of data for archaeological comparison if not correlation. Although his alleged aim as a comparative linguist was to incorporate the archaeological data, Kaufman violated his own dictum by creating a cultural-historical background essentially devoid of any archaeological detail. As others before him, he was concerned primarily with matching linguistic change to broad temporal phases: Archaic (8000-1500 B.C.); Preclassic or Formative (1500 B.C. - A.D. 1); Proto-, Classic and Postclassic (A.D. 1-1500). This approach was additionally flawed by a highly speculative series of "preliminary working principles":

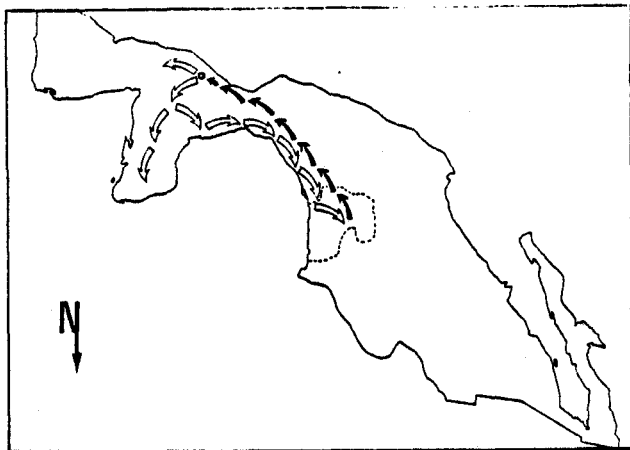
- " 1 In general I use a 'least moves' model, unless convincing evidence points in a different direction.
- 2 Protomayan has terms for both highland and lowland flora and fauna. In this area, lowland people are ignorant of highland products. Therefore, the Protomayan homeland was in a highland area not far from the lowlands.
- 3 In broken highlands, river valleys would facilitate population movements. It is easier to move downstream than upstream.
- 4 There is one highland area in the Maya region that is both fairly near the lowlands and near rivers flowing north, east and west. This is Soloma, including Santa Eulalia, Barillas, and San Juan Ixcay."

(Kaufman 1976:104)

Essentially, Kaufman restated and embellished the Protomayan homeland - migration/divergence - modern distribution explanatory continuum. According to this view, Huastecan speakers separated from the Protomayan homeland about 2200 B.C., migrated down three specified rivers to the Usumacinta basin, on to the gulf coast, then west and north (on foot?) to the modern homeland (a straight line distance of 600 km) by 1500 B.C.

Figure 2

Map of Mexico and Central America; black circle indicates proposed location of Protomayan homeland and dashed line indicates supposed Precolumbian extent of La Huasteca. White arrows suggest proposed paths of dispersal by speakers of major Mayan language groups (arrow east: southern Mayan; arrows north: Yucatecan; arrows west: Huastecan). Black arrows suggest route and return of Chicomiceltecan speakers to Protomayan homeland.



Kaufman also suggests there are no archaeological correlations possible for the migration except in La Huasteca; I assume this refers to the distance achieved by the migration. According to this account, Huastecan continued to diverge in isolation until A.D. 1100 when some Huastecan speakers migrated from northeast Mexico, splitting off to form a group of Chicomuceltecan speakers:

"The glottochronological calculation is highly approximate, since a complete Chicomuceltecan list is unobtainable: I do not wish to speculate on the motives for the migration; there is no question, however, that Chicomuceltecan did migrate from the Huastec area - it shares many phonological, lexical, and grammatical peculiarities with Huastec."

(Kaufman 1976:111)

This is a remarkable migration as it implies a return to the ancient Protomayan homeland after three millennia of absence and divergence (see Figure 2). At any rate, Kaufman does note linguistic borrowings in Huastecan from Zapotecan, suggesting possible movement through and contact with central Mexico in the Late Preclassic period (1976:112). Additionally, he infers there was little contact between central Mexico (Teotihuacan) and La Huasteca in Classic times, and that Totonac occupation of Veracruz is no earlier than the Postclassic period (1976:113). The isolation of La Huasteca from central Mexico alluded to above (and implied for the Maya area) leaves a large blank during the Classic period. Finally, Kaufman suggests a Mixe-Zoque linguistic affiliation for the ancient Olmecs (explaining that mesoamerican languages from Oaxaca to Honduras, including Huastecan, have cultigen and kinship loan terms derived from Mixe-Zoque, but not the converse). This evidence complements Wolf's 1959 assertion that Zoque speakers may have physically and culturally separated Huastecs from the bulk of Mayan speakers.

Archaeological Investigations and Interpretations

Excavation and Culture History

Following earlier sporadic survey and excavation in La Huasteca, Ekholm 1944 undertook a major project in the Panuco-Tampico area in northern Veracruz. Based on materials recovered from stratigraphic trench excavations he described a long ceramic sequence, antedating ca. 1000 B.C., with some of the earliest and poorest quality pottery in Mesoamerica. Ekholm felt Huastecan might be as old as his Period II (Middle Preclassic) and posited connections with the Mamón and Chicanel phases of Uaxactun, Guatemala (1944:505). Although Ekholm noted what he regarded as influences from central and southern Mexico through time, he continued to characterize La Huasteca as a relatively isolated area based on what he perceived as basic material culture continuity proposing, "a long historical outline...reaching from the Early Preclassic to the time of the Spanish conquest" (1973:42).

Later MacNeish excavated at Panuco, Veracruz, and defined a new period (Ponce) with materials "definitely related to those of the Mamón phase of Uaxactun in the Maya area" (1954:624). The work of Ekholm (1944) and MacNeish (1947, 1954) taken together suggests: 1) a basic material culture continuity with the Maya area during the Formative and Early to perhaps Late Preclassic period, 2) severance of Maya-Huastec contact and continuity during the Classic period, and 3) a cultural peak or florescence during the Postclassic period. The close bond between La Huasteca, southern Veracruz, Tabasco, and the eastern gulf lowlands is not thought to have survived through the Classic period.

MacNeish (1954:625) summarized the cultural history and contacts in La Huasteca as follows:

"There seems to be some evidence for advancing the hypothesis that during Formative times there was a culture area from Peten to Panuco that was occupied by Maya-speaking peoples, and that during Classic times in central Veracruz this culture area was split by invaders (possibly Totonacs) from the Valley of Mexico, and that finally, during the militaristic stage, the Huastec and Maya peoples became further separated by the invasion of the Soncautla complex (perhaps Nahuatl-speaking peoples)."

The above comments are interesting in the light of those made on the basis of linguistic implications as the archaeological evidence seems to indicate the Classic period for the divergence, or at least breaking of contact, of Maya and Huastec connections.

The most recent published archaeological investigations in La Huasteca are those of Wilkerson (1973, 1980) at Santa Luisa and El Tajin, Veracruz.

Basically Wilkerson views developments at Santa Luisa (and the rest of La Huasteca, including El Tajin) as gradual and progressive

until about 1150 B.C. when he sees a "brief Omec impulse" followed by the emergence of a strong, regional culture, ethnically Huastec (1980:214). Additionally, he makes several observations on the linguistic inferences cited earlier in this paper:

"It does not appear that the linguistic break between Huastec and the other Mayan languages occurred in north-central Veracruz or northern Veracruz-Tamaulipas. Lexicostatistics dates this separation at 22-29 minimal centuries (Swadesh 1961:237). If such a technique is accurate, and there is some question as to the velocity of change and the nature of core lexical terms, the Huastec-Maya break would be between 900-200 B.C. and about 900-7-B.C. for most Maya languages" (1973:928)

and referring to Olmec influence:

"If the Olmec separated the Maya, or Proto-Maya speakers of the gulf coast, this does not have to be interpreted as signifying that the Olmecs spoke an entirely different language" (1973:929).

Based on his research, Wilkerson is convinced that the most ancient population at the site of El Tajin was of Huastec stock and cousins of the Maya (1980:216). He characterizes El Tajin as a Classic period site and the largest gulf coast urban and ceremonial center of La Huasteca (1980:205). These are important considerations for the arguments being discussed here for they help explain Classic period developments in La Huasteca and possible contacts during that period with the southern Maya.

In an attempt to correlate the linguistically implied Chicomuceltecán separation from Huastecan with archaeological evidence, Wilkerson (1973:883) describes the El Chisto phase (ca. A.D. 1100-1300) as a period of near abandonment at Santa Luisa, which is perhaps coupled with the collapse or eclipse of El Tajin, and argues that Totonacs entered the area at this time and overran Tajin. This Early Postclassic entry correlates well with the linguistic data suggesting that the Huastec, El Tajin population was displaced by Totonacs ca. A.D. 1000-1100, and moved south toward the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and perhaps on to Chiapas, based on dispersed settlements during this period (Wilkerson 1980:220).

Before turning to a discussion relating Huastec and Maya artistic forms, I return briefly to the Maya homeland issue as recent archaeological developments in the Maya lowlands have produced another possible alternative area of dispersal. The findings at Cuello, Belize are the earliest manifestations of Maya occupation in the lowlands or elsewhere (Hammond 1982). Here, the recently defined Swazey complex (ca. 2500-1300 B.C.) antedates Maya highland settlements and the proposed divergence of Protomayan. Hammond (1982:116) comments briefly on the possible linguistic affiliations of these early Maya:

"Whether the people of Cuello in the earliest phase spoke a language we would define as Maya we can never know (although lack of any

other language group in the Maya lowlands in later times suggests they did)."

Huastec and Maya Art and Iconography

As was suggested earlier, the geographic position of La Huasteca in relation to other Mayan speaking groups in historic times indicated to linguists the logical assumption of temporal as well as spatial and linguistic divergence. Below I summarize evidence to suggest, on the basis of common iconographic and other representations, contacts and connections between Huastecs and Classic to Postclassic Maya groups.

The preponderance and antiquity of round structures in La Huasteca led Ekholm (1944) to speculate on a Huastec origin for circular residences and civic architecture. Round huts, "small dome-like houses...their yellow color indicates thatch" (Pollock 1936) are seen in a mural at Chichen Itza (Temple of the Jaguars):

"The beehive huts at the base of this mural also point to activities outside the Yucatan peninsula, where round huts are unreported. The huts of the Huastec are round...which would indicate that the round hut was probably a Precolumbian feature of Huastec life".

(Thompson 1972:19)

Although Classic and especially Postclassic Huastec stone sculpture is thought to show little similarity to Maya art of the same time periods (Proskouriakoff 1954; Ekholm 1973), suggesting little contact or shared iconography between the two groups, Thompson (1949) drew together a number of isolated items which support a less isolationist view. Among the most prominent of these are: 1) Nal-Tel corn was grown in both La Huasteca and the Maya lowlands, 2) calendar dates in La Huasteca (and at El Tajin) are given in the Maya bar and dot system after A.D. 500, 3) decorative scroll elements on "Classic Veracruz style" carvings such as palmas correspond most closely with Puuc Maya design elements, 4) a spindle whorl found at San Jose, Belize was decorated in Huastec style and painted with asphalt which probably came from La Huasteca, and 5) the Early Postclassic ballcourt panel sculpture of Chichen Itza in Yucatan and at El Tajin Chico are compatible in style, execution and content. These indicated to Thompson contact between the areas from A.D. 850 to 1000 as well as during the Formative period.

Conclusion

This review of linguistic and archaeological evidence has attempted to reconcile and correlate sometimes highly divergent views of ancient events, processes, cultures and languages. On the problem of La Huasteca development and relations with the Maya area, linguists

have relied heavily on historic distribution of languages, migration theory and lexicostatistical inference. While accepting (with some hesitation) the representativeness of the first and the margin of error of the third, implied migration without apparent reason or motivation is difficult for an archaeologist to sanction when no archaeological materials, sudden change, or perceived event is evident. On the other hand, archaeologists often tend to view the ancient world from their adopted (ancient) cultural perspective. This may lead to false impressions of temporal continuity, local innovation, and relative isolation.

In light of recent evidence from northern Belize, linguists must now consider a lowland, Protomayan homeland more closely. Additionally, migrations can occur in two directions and La Huasteca includes both highlands and lowlands, thus it is possible that the southern Mayan languages may have dispersed from Veracruz. An archaeologist has provided an explanation and event which might elucidate the slightly improbable splitting off of Chicomuceltecan from Huastecan, but it remains for linguists to establish whether Veracruzano and Potosino are dialects or distinct languages and, if the latter is so, why, when, and how?

Finally, I think I have presented sufficient evidence to indicate that the separation of Huastecs from ancient Maya populations has been exaggerated primarily on the basis of modern spatial and linguistic divergence. That an ancient Yucatec Maya and Huastec could not have communicated verbally in their native tongues during the Preclassic period or thereafter does not preclude the possibility of shared heritage, trade, religious movements or armed intrusion.

Based on this review I must agree with Eric Thompson (1949:453):

"En resumen, podemos decir que desde la epoca formativa hasta la llegada de los españoles, Veracruz y la region Maya tuvieron vinculados por fuertes eslabones culturales".

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