Irrealis Modality in Ch’orti’ Maya

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Handout for:
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Mayan languages
(from Inga E. Calvin 2004:8 at www.famsi.org, modified from Robertson 1992:fig.1.1: Houston et al 2000:Fig. 1)

Classic Ch’olti’an (Hieroglyphic Mayan)
Ch’orti’ Maya

1. Verbal and nominal inflection

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Principal uses of pronoun sets (adapted from Wichmann 1999:21)

**Set A:** Subject of a transitive verb in the completive or in completive aspect

(E sitz’ ub’ejri e si’ / The boy carries firewood.)

Nominal possessive

(E ajkuchya’r isik watar taka njpojp / The pregnant woman came with my petate mat.)

**Set B:** Object of a transitive verb

(E jopop am upute’n tama uya ‘rar uti’ / The spider burned me with its saliva.)

Subject of an intransitive verb in the completive aspect

(E ajk’otoreb’ isa’b’ takarob’ tama uyotot e Jwan / The authorities went with them to Juan’s house.)

**Set C:** Subject of intransitive verbs in the incompletive aspect

(E ich’ok glok’oy twa’ ujuch’u e ixim / The young girl leaves to grind corn.)

2. Aspect and transitive verbs

Transitive verbs are ambiguous in terms of aspect.

- **a)** E Chepa uwajri u’t e yotot taka e mesyob’
  Josephina sweeps the floor of the house with the broom.
- **b)** E ich’ok umayi u’r’ e tejromob’ taka ub’uzir u’t.
  The young girl dazzles the boys with her beauty.

3. Adverbs and aspects with transitive verbs

The completive and incompletive aspects can be distinguished with the use of temporal adverbs.

- **a)** E ma’n uyari ulajib’ e ja’ twa’ utz’ayi upa’k’b’a’r cha’b’i’i.
  The assistant dug a canal of (the) water in order to water his field two days ago.
- **b)** Sajmi no’n kamuki e chamen
  Today we bury the dead
4. Aspectual agreement in narrations

Numuy[Ø] ye'bar e xukur xe’ a'xin tente’ noj chinam
He passed below the river that goes/went to a big city

xe’ uk’ab’a Puerto Barrios. Numuy[Ø] ye’bar i ja’xir alok’oy tama
that its name is Puerto Barrios. He passed below and he leaves/leaves to

e chinam xe’ uk’ab’a Kiriwa tya’ turanob’ aní inmojrix noj winikob’.
the city that its name is Quirigua where they use to live other kings.

Ya e’yni ja’xir alok’oy tama e b’i’r yaja’ makwi’r e witzir
There they say he leaves/leaves on (the) road that within the mountain

konde ayan aní yaja’ e tz’ojyir taka e mojrob’ e noj winikob’.
when there was the war with the other the kings.

5. Irrealis and the particle aní.

According to Fought (1974:39), the particle aní “designates an indefinite past period.” Fought gives two examples in order to illustrate this concept (original orthography altered throughout):

a) jente / ‘(They’re) people’.
b) jente aní / ‘They used to be people’.

In addition, Fought explains that aní can signify “an explicitly past time reference” when one is presented with a contrast with an “implicitly present time of reference.”

a) A’rob’na e chinam twa’ alok’o’b’ / The town is told that they should leave.
b) A’rob’na e chinam twa’ alok’o’b’ aní / The town was told that they should leave.


According to Pérez Martínez (1994:138), aní is used with “una acción indefinida o sea que no está terminada” (with an indefinite action or one that is not finished).

a) War aní inwayan, pejkne’n / (I) was sleeping (when) I was called.
b) War aní ipatná. / I was working.
c) E maxtak war aní atz’ojyob’. / The children were fighting.

Lubeck and Cowie have noted that the meaning of the particle aní “is between the subjunctive mood, that is to say that it didn’t happen in a positive manner, or, to say that it in fact did happen in a negative manner. Another way to describe what aní means, it’s about something that doesn’t exist in the present…When aní is used with verbs or with aspects, it means that the action is not happening at the moment. It could be that it has happened in the past or that it will occur in the future, but not right now. Or it could be that it happened or will happen only in the mind of the person speaking (1989:123).”

a) Nyo’tot aní / My house that I want to build / My house that I am yet to build (It exists only in the mind of the speaker)
b) K’aní aní inche nyo’tot / I wanted to build a house (but he or she didn’t).
6. A reexamination of the use of the particle *ani*

The particle *ani* has a wide range of uses in Ch’orti’. Its primary functions are to signal an indefinite past time reference and to denote irrealis. What follows is an explanation of many of these functions. Without a doubt, some of the definitions below could be grouped into larger categories. The purpose here, however, is to give a more descriptive analysis that give a better idea of its scope of use.

[Note: All translations below are fairly literal without much syntactic alteration in English]

1) It expresses an action in the past when the aspect is not definite.

   a) *Af de che ke’ uch’u’b’o’b’ *ani* e tz’ojok tu’t e witzir tichan.*
      Finally they say that they hung the string in front of the mountain high.

2) It expresses an incomplete action in the past

   a) *Nipya’r war *ani* uche unojk’inar ujab’. Ayan *ani* e b’ak’atpa’ i e lajb’a’r.*
      My friend was having his anniversary. There were (the) tamales and (the) music.

   b) *E’ isik lok’esna tama e otot tya’ turu *ani.*
      The woman was forced out from the house where she was living.

   c) *Warix atz’akpa e winik xe’ ch’a’r *ani* ajmok.*
      Now he is waking up the man who was lying down sick.

   d) *E’ xoyoyokja’ umaki e chinam i usati e pak’ab’ xe’ turob’ *ani* yaja’.*
      The lagoon covered the city and destroyed the people who were living there.

   e) *Tanyajr ayan *ani* cha’kojt yar maxatku…*
      Once upon a time there were two little children…

3) It expresses an action that might happen in the future or might already have happened in the past.

   a) *Kawira b’ajk’at ke’ achamob’ *ani* taka e tz’ak.*
      We see perhaps that it would die with the poison.

   b) *E’ murak ne’ptoko. Uk’anto *ani* ko’ra twa’ atak’a.*
      The jocote fruit is not quite ripe still. It lacks a little in order to mature.

   c) *Ne’ ink’ani *ani* anema lok’i’ket tara.*
      I would like it if you would leave here.

   d) *Chi’ ina’ta xe’ uk’eche’n *ani inxin inyajrer tu’t niitu’?*
      Who of you knows how to carry me away right away before my mother?

   e) *K’ani *ani* yub’i e ojroner tama ke’ oni’x *ani* ayan *ani* e Chijchans a’rob’na *ani.*
      I would like it if you would listen to the story about how long ago there were (the) Chijchans, as it is told.

   f) *Ub’ijnusyaj nojta’ *ani* tu’jor i tu’yalma ke’ tya’ anumuy, ub’ijnu.*
      His idea great in his mind and in his heart (was) that when she passes by, he thought of ixik xe’ kisiera *ani* tur’ik takar i b’ajk’at tu’b’ijnusyaj uk’ani *ani* nojta’.

   g) “*B’ajk’at e Tio Chakola uk’eche’t *ani i’xin’ cha’yi.*”
      “Perhaps (the) Uncle Chakola would be able to carry you away,” they say he said.

4) It expresses a doubt as to the truth of the statement.

   a) *I’ ixto yaja’ ayan *ani* b’ajk’at e’ra’ch e nukir chijchans *ani.*
      And indeed there there were perhaps it’s true a large snake.

   b) *Ink’ub se ayan *ani* yotot,” che.*
      “I believe there may have been houses,” he said.
5) It expresses the idea of non-existence at the moment. It is thus commonly used to talk about deceased persons.

a) “B’antaka war ache kocha atata ani” che.
   “Just because you are playing the role of your late father,” he said.

b) Chi’ k’echer umen e tuntun twa’ nitata ani?
   Who possesses the drum of my late father?

d) Cha’b’i’ puray nyo’tot ani.
   Two days ago it burned down my house (that now no longer exists).

6) It is used with the habitual past for actions done repeatedly in the past.

a) Lo ke’ ucho’b’ e onya’n pak’ab’ob’, alok’o’b’ ani patir taka yar e kandelirob’...
   What they did, the ancestors, was they used to go outside with their little candles...

b) Ukacho’b’ ani e chakchak payuj tu’nak’ twa’ ma’chi ache’na kilisar.
   They used to tie the red cloth around their stomach so that they wouldn’t be hurt by the eclipse.

7) It is used with verbs whose actions did not happen as expected or as hoped but were as desires in the past which never came to fruition.

a) “Ne’n ink’eche’ani i’xin, pero mixtuk’a nik’ek’wa’r” cha’yi.
   “I tried to carry you away, but I didn’t have enough of my strength,” they say he said.

8) It expresses irrealis in the dependent clause of conditional sentences.

a) Ja’nixik ayan nitumin, innani ani inkojt chij.
   If I had money, I would buy a horse.
   (Si yo tuviera dinero, compraría un caballo) (Pérez Martinez 1994:141)

b) Takaren ka’yì war ixana, ma’chi ani chamay nitz i’.
   With me if you had been going, would not have died my dog.
   (If you had been going with me, my dog wouldn’t have died)

Summary

The particle ani primarily represents actions as not having any relation to the present. Actions can be indefinite references in the past or future, but they are explicitly outside the realm of any discourse in the present. In addition, ani is used to cast doubt or express incertitude about the speaker’s knowledge of a particular event. It is also used to express an action hoped for but not realized. In short, the notion of irrealis lies at heart of its usage in Ch’orti.

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Sources cited

