

## GRAMMAR IN THE SCRIPT:

### ERGATIVE LANGUAGES AND ABSOLUTIVE PRONOUNS

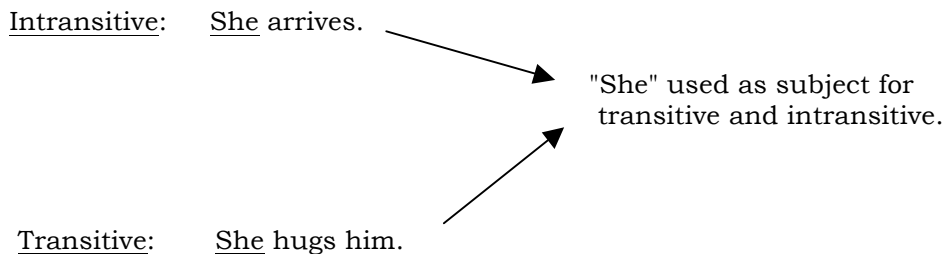
by Hutch Kinsman

This article begins a series of grammatical essays dedicated to verbal analysis in the hieroglyphic script that are designed to give the tools of the linguist to the non-linguist epigrapher. Most linguists would agree that understanding the verb is key to understanding the inscribed events and as such the verbal analyses developed herein will focus around two verbal flow charts<sup>1</sup> developed by the author, one for transitive constructions and one for intransitive constructions. The intransitive flow chart is reproduced at the end of this article at this time for reference only, as future articles will develop the background necessary to recognize the many different verb forms found throughout the script. Controversy surrounds many of these verb forms and ideas, and when practical the author will point out differing views. Once the basic construction is determined then by applying some fundamental principles it is possible to determine a viable translation based on recognizable inflections.

Many of these constructions are new to non-linguists because the language of the Maya is an ergative, or ergative/absolute, language whereas English speakers usually are only familiar with languages categorized as nominative/accusative<sup>2</sup>. In fact, most all the world's languages are divided up into these two categories, 1) the nominative/accusative case languages and, 2) the ergative/absolute case languages. Nominative refers to the word or phrase relating to the subject, or performer of an action, and accusative refers to the object, that is the receiver of the action, either the direct object of a transitive verb or an object of a preposition. About three fourths of the world's languages, including English and most of the Indo-European languages, are nominative/accusative. Figure 1.1 shows many, but not all, of these languages.

In the nominative/accusative case system, the grammatical indication for the **subject** of either a **transitive** verb or an **intransitive** verb is the same.

In English for instance:



The pronoun form for the **subject**, "she", of both the transitive verb and the intransitive verb is the same. The pronoun for the direct object of the transitive verb is different, in this case 'him'. "Him" is the form of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular masculine pronoun in the accusative case. It would not be correct to use the nominative form of the pronoun in the direct object position or vice versa as in

<sup>1</sup> The first verbal flow charts developed by the author were included in the workbook for Crabs and Glyphs 2004 (Kinsman, 2004:20)

<sup>2</sup> Background information for this discussion of case systems is found in "Understanding Syntax" (Tallerman, 1998:146-207).

\*"Her hugs he." The \* before the sentence means that it is not grammatically correct, but the sentence is used to illustrate a point.

Most of the rest, about one fourth, of the world's languages are classified as ergative/absolutive languages (Dixon, 1994:10). In the ergative/absolutive languages, to which the Mayan languages belong, the pronoun form for the **subject (=agent)** of a **transitive** verb has its own form called the **ergative** pronoun:

**only used for**  
**Ergative** (set "A" pronoun) =====> **Subject of transitive verb**

Ergative pronouns are called set "A" pronouns and are affixed as a prefix to the verb in the hieroglyphic script and many Mayan languages. Though not related to the ergative notation, the subject of a transitive verb is labeled "A" for "agent". The ergative pronoun cannot be used for the subject of an intransitive verb<sup>3</sup>, neither can it be used for the direct object of a transitive verb.

A different pronoun form is used for both the **subject** of an **intransitive** verb and the **direct object** of a **transitive** verb. This form is called the **absolutive** case and a **single** form serves **two different purposes**.

	<b>one</b>	<b>two</b>	
	=====→		
<b>Absolutive</b> pronoun (Set "B" pronoun)	<b>form</b>	<b>uses</b>	
			Subject "S" of Intransitive Verb <b>or</b> Object "O" of Transitive Verb

Absolutive pronouns are labeled set "B" pronouns by linguists and are affixed as a suffix to the verbal root. An absolutive pronoun will appear as either the subject or object in a clause, but not both at the same time (Why?)

In other words, with an ergative pronoun attached to a verb<sup>4</sup>, the construction has to be transitive with a transitive verb with a subject and a direct object in the sentence or clause. The ergative pronoun will agree, that is it will have the same number, singular or plural, and the same person, I, you, he/she/it, we, you, or they, as the subject. There is no gender specific ergative pronoun, so from the context we have to decide whether we have a 'he', 'she', or 'it'. In addition, in this same clause or sentence we know that an absolutive pronoun will also be affixed to the verb and will agree in person and number with the direct object. If only an absolutive pronoun is found, then the verbal construction will be intransitive, with the absolutive pronoun as the subject itself or in agreement with the subject.

Ergative and absolutive pronouns are pronomial affixes and as such they are dependent pronouns, always affixed to the verb. Independent pronouns, like *ha'ob*, "those, those ones", occurring occasionally throughout the script, may also be present. Because the English language has no dependent pronouns, the pronomial affixes will always be translated as one of the personal pronouns, like "he", unless the antecedent exists in the clause, for instance "Jaguar Paw", in which case the dependent pronoun need not be explicitly expressed. Students of Spanish know that the form of the verb also indicates which form of the personal pronoun is being used and as such the

<sup>3</sup> Some modern Maya languages contain an exception to this rule known as "split ergativity", where an ergative pronoun is used as the subject for an intransitive verb in the incompletive aspect. Most linguists now agree that there is no evidence for split ergativity in the hieroglyphic script.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of an ergative pronoun prefixed to a noun in the predicate position, the statement will then be a possessed noun in a stative construction, for example, '*awinaken*', "I am your servant".

independent pronoun is usually not required, for example, either "Yo quiero ...", or just "Quiero ..." is a correct form of "I want..." and either "Ella quiere..." or "Quiere..." is a correct form of "She wants...".

In diagram form for the hieroglyphic script:

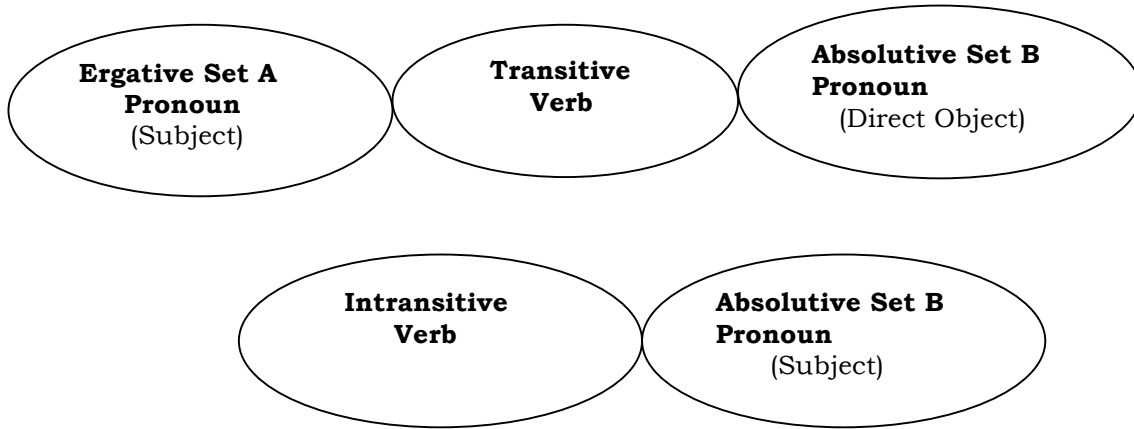


Table 1.1 shows absolutive pronoun affixes in the Maya script—note that in Epigraphic Maya the absolutive pronouns are all suffixes.


Person	Singular			Plural		
		Subject (Verb intrans.)	Object (Verb trans.)		Subject (Verb intrans.)	Object (Verb trans.)
<b>1st</b>	 -(k)e-n(a)  -een	"I"	"me"	"we" ?	"us"	
<b>2nd</b>	-at		"you"	?	"you-all"	
<b>3rd</b>	- Ø ('null')	"he/ she/ it"	"him/ her/ it"	-oob'	"they"	"them"

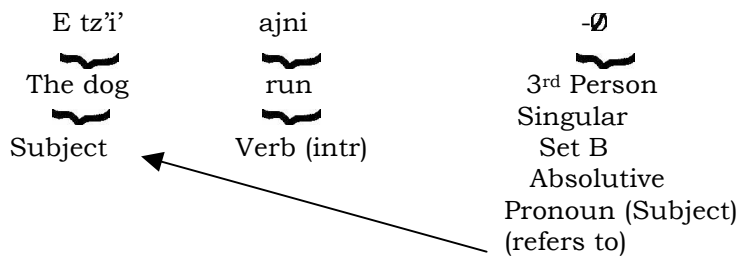
Table 1.1. Epigraphic Mayan **Absolutive Pronouns** ('Set B') (after the Sourcebook for the XXXIst Maya Hieroglyphic Forum at Texas, (Stuart, 2007:110). The first person absolutive singular -en is from Piedras Negras Lintel 3, **a-wi-na-ke-na**, *awinaken*, 'I am your servant' (D. Stuart). The English

translations for each Mayan pronoun are shown, depending on whether the absolutive pronoun is used as the Subject or Direct Object.

The null,  $\emptyset$ , or zero with a slash through it, is the linguistic notation for showing the placement of an element that in this case has no visible written expression. The chart above shows that a pronoun in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular will have just such a null, whereas the other pronomial affixes do have actual written expression. Examples of the first and second person plural have yet to be found in the script, but all of the present day Mayan languages do have visible suffixes in each.

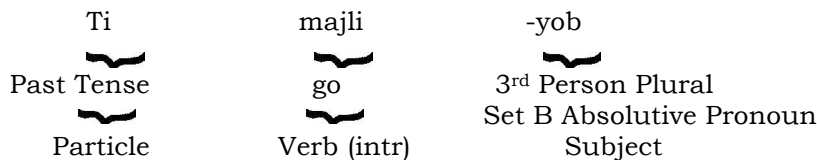
Here are some examples of absolutive pronouns as subjects both in present day Mayan languages and Epigraphic Maya. Notice that the pronomial affix by itself can be the subject in the sentence or refer to the antecedent if present.

Ex. 1 (Ch'orti'). Intransitive. *E tz'i' ajni.* The dog runs.



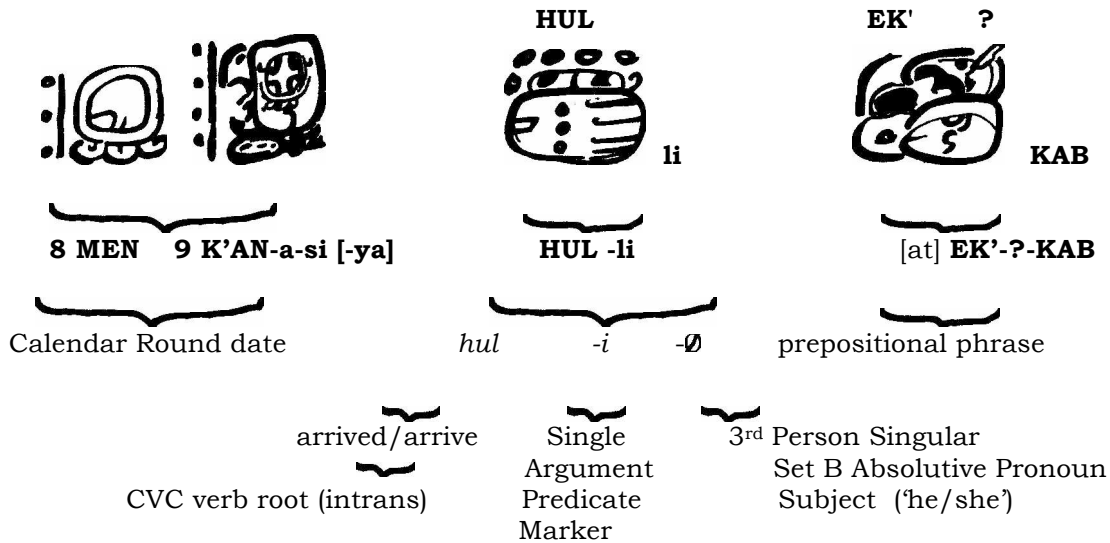
In Ch'orti' the absolutive pronoun is a suffix and shows up as a 'null' in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular and agrees with its antecedent, the subject "The dog". The verb 'ajni' is translated 'runs' in the Ch'orti' grammar by P.L.F.M. (Perez, 1994:123).

Ex. 2 (Chol). Intransitive. *Ti majliyob.* They went.



"Ti" is a particle (=uninflected, stand-alone word) found in a dialect spoken in Tila (author,year:page) that makes the verb past tense. The verb "majle!" means "to go". When a verb in Chol ends in *-el*, the *-el* is replaced by *-i* in the past tense. The suffix *-yob* indicates third person plural absolutive—the subject "they" (Warkentin and Scott, 1980:72). Remember, the rules of the language dictate where the absolutive pronoun occurs, as a suffix or as a prefix. Whether the verb is transitive or intransitive determines whether the absolutive pronoun is a direct object or a subject.

Ex. 3 (Epigraphic Maya). Intransitive. *8 Men 9 K'ayab huli ek'-?-kab...* On 8 Men 9 K'ayab he/she arrived [at] the dark cave place...[Naj Tunich, Drawing 34, by A. Stone (Stone, 1995:177)].








The set B absolute pronoun subject refers to the subject person listed later on in the passage. Again, the fact that the absolute pronoun occurs as a suffix is dictated by the rules of the language. And since in Epigraphic Maya the absolute set B pronoun occurs as a suffix, then it is known the null  $\emptyset$  occurs as a suffix. Exactly why the suffix *-i* is added on to a CVC verbal root has not been determined, however, one thought (M. Zender, personal communication) is that this suffix marks the verb as a predicate that only has a single argument (subject) and therefore the verb is intransitive<sup>5</sup>. In reference to how Epigraphic Mayan words are spelled, in the case of a noun the second vowel of the second syllable is dropped, that is the CVCV becomes CVC. However with many of the intransitive verbs ending in *-i* most epigraphers now accept the fact that the ending *-i* is included in the full spelling of the verb. Another controversial topic is whether past or present tense or completive or incompletive aspect is marked in the script. This series of articles will follow the convention that dictates neither tense nor aspect in particular is marked exclusively but is interpreted as either according to context (B. MacLeod, personal communication). The latest and currently accepted convention also dictates that in transcription the logographs will be written in capital boldface letters (**HUL**) and normal CV syllables in lower case bold letters (**-li**) and in transliteration the complete element, word, stem, or suffix will be written in italics (*huli, hul, -i*). See *The Linguistics of Maya Writing* for more information on transcription and transliteration (Lacadena and Wichmann, 2004:133).

<sup>5</sup> The suffix *-i* on the intransitive verbs has been a very controversial subject. See section IV *Mayan Languages and the Basics of Grammar* (Stuart, 2007:131) of the Sourcebook for the XXXIst Maya Hieroglyphic Forum for additional remarks.

Ex. 4 (Epigraphic Maya. Pal.T. XIX.). *I uhti B'olon Kib 19 K'anasiy ochi k'ahk' [ta Waxak Nah...].*

And then it happened on 9 Kib 19 k'ayab fire entered [into 8 ... house...].<sup>6</sup>

							
<b>I</b>	<b>U-ti</b>	<b>9 K'IB' 19 K'AN-a-si-ya</b>	<b>OCH-chi-</b>	<b>K'AHK'</b>			
<i>I</i>	<i>uht-i</i>	-∅	<i>9 Kib' 19 K'ayab</i>	<i>och</i>	<i>-i</i>	-∅	<i>k'ahk'</i>
And then	happen verb (intrans)	3 <sup>rd</sup> Person Singular Set B Absolutive Pronoun Subject ('it')	Cal Rnd  verb (intrans) CVC root	'enter'	Single Argument Predicate Marker	3 <sup>rd</sup> Per. Singular Set B Absolutive Subject (agrees with subject 'fire')	'fire' Subject
Con- junction							

In the first intransitive verb, *uhti*, happen, we're assuming two things: 1) that the *-i* ending is part of the verb, in this case the single argument predicate marker as explained above marking an intransitive verb, and 2) that the verb is past tense—that the past and present tense are not distinguished and either may be translated according to context. The null ∅ follows the *-i* and represents the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular absolutive pronoun 'it', the subject. In the second clause we're again assuming the full form of the verb *ochi* includes the single argument predicate marker *-i* and the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular absolutive pronoun is present as a null ∅ agreeing in person and number with the subject "fire". We continue with the past tense according to context, although conceivably present tense could be used for both verbs as a means of telling the story in this passage.

**SUMMARY**

A salient grammatical feature of the Epigraphic Maya inscriptions is the use of the absolutive pronominal affix as the subject in intransitive constructions and the object in transitive constructions<sup>7</sup>. The ironic aspect is that this ever-present absolutive affix usually occurs as the invisible third person singular form, the "null". The use of the absolutive, however is the first step in understanding the intransitive constructions found throughout the script. Most of the specific intransitive constructions currently understood are listed in the center column of the following intransitive flow chart. Though only the plain intransitive has been discussed here, future articles will explain each of these other intransitive constructions and develop the tools necessary for translation.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to "The Inscriptions from Temple XIX at Palenque" for complete drawings (Stuart, 2005:99).

<sup>7</sup> David Mora-Marin discusses use of the transitive versus intransitive as related to "preferred argument structure" in *Linguistics of Maya Writing* (Mora-Marin,2004:339).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The genesis for these grammatical essays began in the summer of 1998 with the first Crabs and Glyphs hieroglyphic workshop which allowed a small group of amateur epigraphers to interact with a likewise small group of linguists with Barbara MacLeod as the main instigator, monitor, and expounder of new and current ideas in the grammatical world of the hieroglyphic inscriptions. The goal is to allow the common epigrapher to understand and apply the current and controversial ideas put forth by the professional linguist.

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