Status Markers Distinguish Independent from Conjunct Verbs in Tojol-ab'al (Mayan)
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What has been labeled in Mayan languages a "verb status marker" (Kaufman and Norman 1984) or less commonly a "verb marker" or "theme" (Furbee-Losee 1976), in Tojol-ab'al (Mayan) defines classes of transitive verbs. The largest, Class 1, carries the suffix \(-V_w\) after the root, where the V is realized as \(a\), \(o\), or \(u\) depending on the vowel of the transitive verb (the status marker is underlined): Class 1 –aw: aw-il-aw-on 'you saw me', -ow- wa x-s-job'-a-Ø* 'he asks it'. At least three small classes of transitive verb roots bear different status markers, and define additional classes. Class 2, -aj: y'-i'-aj-Ø-e' 'he took them'; Class 3, -ay: y-aw-ay-Ø-e' 'they shouted it'; Class 4 -iy-: k-ab'-iy-Ø-tik 'we heard it'. In addition to marking classes of transitive root verbs, these markers usually occur on finite verbs in independent clauses, whereas transitive root verbs in subordinate (conjunct) clauses lack them.

In her 1976 grammar of Tojol-ab'al Furbee identified the status marker/verb theme as having multiple functions, (a) identifying transitive root verb class, (b) marking finiteness, and (c) indicating a transitive root verb in a main clause. She recognized also that a marker -iy- on intransitive verbs shared the second and third functions: el-iy-on 'I exited.' Example 1 below illustrates that usual case. The first verb is a compound, both parts of which are marked with status markers. The second verb is an intransitive, ko', which would carry the -iy- status marker of intransitives in a main clause, but in the subordinate clause does not. Following a distinction recognized by Algonquianists, I label these as 'independent' and 'conjunct' verbs, respectively.

1. pwes ja'ni wa x-k-al-aw=w-ab'-iy-Ø-ex
   Well, now, I’m going to tell you all
   jastal ko'-Ø/ko'-i-Ø ja dyos ja lomantani.
   how the god in Lomantán came down.

As in Algonquian languages, Tojol-ab'al has exceptions to this main-clause, subordinate-clause generalization. From another version of the same story:

B. bwena aj le'al jun jkwento ja ke'na, .... (Aux + participle)
   Well, I’m going to tell my story, ....
   komo jastal sta'/sta' ja jtatik dijos ja ermano minga,  INDEPENDENT
   how Sister Minga encountered God our Father,
   este jach’ wajj/*waji jastal iti:
   Just how it happened:
   CONJUNCT

C. entonse ti xa el-Ø/*eli-huera’ a, ja ye’na ermana Minga.
   So there now she would exit to the outside, she, Sister Minga.

The ti....a is a locative and subjunctive marker of clauses, usually with a focused subject.

Use of Independent-Conjunct forms appears governed by discourse and pragmatic considerations: e.g., to indicate reported speech, doubt, counterevidence. This paper presents a first approximation of the constructions and pragmatic considerations of Tojol-ab'al for the Independent-Conjunct distinctions. Since there is evidence of the status marker — and many other particles involved (e.g., the ti of ti … a) — in hieroglyphic inscriptions, understanding use of the Independent-Conjunct forms makes more accessible the discourse rules of glyph texts. Given the completeness of the system in Tojol-ab'al, due to preservation of the complete status marker suffix by the absolutive pronouns, The Tojol-ab'al language may be a model for synchronic comparisons. These materials also speak to the current discussion of whether the primary language of the Classic Lowland Mayan hieroglyph texts was a form of Pre-Ch'olan or Proto-Ch'olan (Mora-Marin 2009) or of Classic Ch'olti' (Houston et al. 2000).