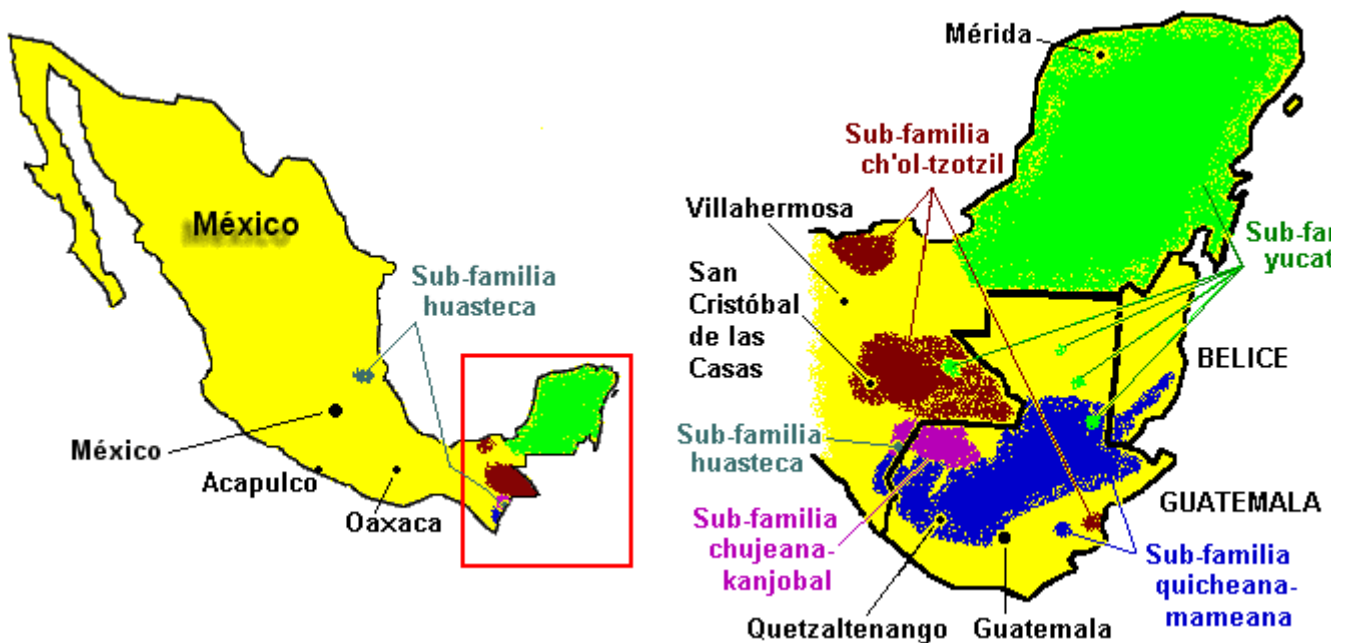


[\[Versión en español\]](#)

Mayan family



The Mayan language family comprises five sub-families and includes many languages that are spoken in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. In Mexico, Mayan languages are spoken in seven states: Chiapas, Tabasco, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Campeche, San Luis Potosí and Veracruz. In Chiapas, all the languages are Mayan (except Zoque), as are virtually all the indigenous languages of Guatemala. (The maps below show approximate distribution of these languages, including some recent migrations.) The total number of Mayan speakers is over 1.5 million, making this family one of the two largest in Mexico (the other being the Nahuatl family).



The five subfamilies of Mayan languages are:

- Ch'ol-Tzotzil subfamily
- Huastecan subfamily
- Yucatecan subfamily
- Chujean-Kanjobal subfamily
- Quichean-Mamean subfamily

There are numerous ruins of the ancient Mayan civilization in the states of Chiapas and Yucatan, as well as in Guatemala. These archeological sites

and the artifacts discovered in them display a highly developed aesthetic sense—in stone sculpture, ceramic work, the casting of precious metals, mosaics, and the carving of crystal and jade—all of these produced without metal tools. The Mayas had invented the abstract symbol of zero to simplify mathematics long before it was in use in Europe, and the Mayan calendar was older and more efficient than the Julian calendar that was in use by the Spaniards who conquered Mexico.

In the 1950s one could distinguish what area people came from by the distinctive clothing of both men and women. Now many are buying clothing in stores, especially the men. The women who live in high altitudes prefer traditional dress with its long skirts woven with wool from their own sheep. Some of their shawls were of wool also, which gave them and their babies much more protection on frosty winter days.

Typical Mayan diet consists of corn (maize), beans and squash. Some make small gardens near their homes where they plant cabbage or other greens, long radish, or other vegetables. Many Mayans do not have enough land to grow all the corn they need for their families, nor do they have enough wooded area on their land to provide them with firewood, so they seek land wherever they can find it. The **Tzeltales**, especially, expanded greatly from their original territory during the second half of the twentieth century, migrating into the Lacandón jungle in eastern Chiapas.

Many of the languages in this family tend to have long, complex words containing many **prefixes** and **suffixes**. For example, 'the teacher' in **Tzotzil** is **li jchanubtasvaneje**; this expression consists of the following pieces: **li** 'the', **j** 'human agent', **chan** 'learn', **ub** 'become', **tas** '**causative**', **van** 'habitually', **ej** 'nominalizer' and **e** 'end of phrase'. So, the meaning of this word is literally 'one who habitually causes (someone) to learn something'.

One distinctive characteristic of Mayan languages is their use of glottalized consonants. These are formed by closing off the vocal folds (vocal cords) behind a **consonant** like **p**, **t**, or **k**, and raising the larynx to build up extra pressure that results in a "pop" after the consonant as the pressure is released by the tongue or lips. (See the diagram of [the principal organs of articulation](#).) Usually, glottalization is written with an apostrophe following the consonant. For example, there are three glottalized consonants in the **Tzeltal** phrase **c'ux c'ajc'al**, which means 'it's hot out', or literally, 'the sun/day hurts'.

[\[How to hear the sound recordings\]](#)

For more information

- The Mayan family is [not obviously related](#) to other languages in Mexico.

- [Population statistics by language family](#)
- [Ethnologue listing](#)

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Ch'ol-Tzotzil subfamily

Ch'ol, Chortí, Tabasco Chontal, Tzeltal, Tzotzil

The languages that make up the Ch'ol-Tzotzil subfamily are mostly spoken in Chiapas, except for Chortí in eastern Guatemala and Chontal in Tabasco; see [the maps](#) above. (This Chontal should not be confused with [Oaxaca Chontal](#), which has no relation to the Mayan languages.) Some linguists consider this subfamily to be two subfamilies: the first includes Ch'ol, Chontal and Chortí; the second includes Tzeltal and Tzotzil.

Like many of the language families of Mexico, the languages of this subfamily contain some dialectal variation, especially Ch'ol and Tzotzil. The Tzotzil people recognize five major dialects of the Tzotzil language: San Miguel Huixtán, San Pedro Chenalhó, San Juan Chamula, San Andrés Larráinzar, and Zinacantán. In each dialect, others who speak the same dialect are referred to as **jchi'iltic** 'our companions' when talking to each other and as **jchi'iltac** when talking to people from other dialects. Tzotziles refer to their language generally as **Bats'ic'op** 'real language'.

The languages in this subfamily tend to have a normal word order that is rare in the world's languages: verb - object - subject. (An alternate order, subject - verb - object, is also used.) It would appear that many ancient Mayan inscriptions are written in some language from this subfamily, and the modern Ch'ol [dictionary](#) is considered crucial for deciphering them.

The research work of the [Summer Institute of Linguistics](#) in this subfamily has been finished.

Publications by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its members

Linguistics

- [dictionaries and vocabularies](#), including:
 - [Diccionario Ch'ol de Tumbalá](#)
- [grammars](#) (Ch'ol, Tzotzil)
- [texts](#)

Literacy and literature

- [National anthem in Tabasco Chontal](#)
- primers
- books of traditional stories and other native-authored literature
- books to help with agriculture and health
- [New Testaments](#)
- Old Testament summaries

Various fields

- technical articles
- doctoral dissertations (Tzeltal)

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Huastecan subfamily

Chicomuceltec, Huastec Maya

There are two (or possibly three) very similar variants of Huastec (huasteco) which are spoken in the states of Veracruz and San Luis Potosi, far from the other Mayan languages. As a result, the culture of its speakers is not typically Mayan but resembles more the culture of neighboring groups. The work done by the [Summer Institute of Linguistics](#) in Huastec of San Luis Potosi has been finished, but its work continues in the Veracruz variant(s). The possibly extinct language Chicomuceltec (chicomucelteco) of Chiapas and Guatemala also belongs to this subfamily. (See [the maps](#) above.)

Publications by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its members (Huastec)

Linguistics

- vocabulary
- master's thesis

Literacy and literature

- primers
- books of traditional stories and other native-authored literature
- health pamphlets
- [New Testament \(Huastec\)](#)

Various fields

- technical articles

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Yucatecan subfamily

Itzá, Lacandón, Mopan Maya, Yucatec (Yucatec Maya)

Lacandón is spoken by a few small communities (less than 1000 people total) in the lowland jungles of eastern Chiapas, largely surrounded by [Tzeltal](#) speakers. Yucatec Maya is spoken in the states of Yucatan, Campeche, and Quintana Roo; there are also speakers of this language in Belize. (There is also an [indigenous sign language](#) used in at least one Yucatec community.) Itzá (nearly extinct) and Mopán Maya are native to Guatemala and Belize. (See [the maps](#) above.)

The [Summer Institute of Linguistics](#) has completed its studies in Lacandón. SIL has not developed a program for Yucatec, although a small number of studies were published many years ago (the Yucatec community relies on its own linguistic resources).

Publications by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its members

Anthropology

- *Two studies on the Lacandonnes of Mexico* (Baer and Merrifield, 1971) [\[price\]](#). Also published in Spanish by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1972.

Literacy and literature

- primers (Lacandón and Yucatec)
- books of traditional stories and other native-authored literature (Lacandon)
- [New Testament \(Lacandon\)](#)

Various fields

- technical articles (Lacandón and Yucatec)

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Chujean-Kanjobal subfamily

Chuj, Jacalteco, Kanjobal, Motozintleco (Mochó, Tuzanteco),

Tojolabal

The languages of this subfamily straddle the border between Chiapas and Guatemala. Tojolabal is spoken in Chiapas; Chuj, Jacalteco and Kanjobal are spoken mostly in Guatemala, although there are some speakers in Chiapas. Motozintleco (Chiapas) is nearly extinct. (See [the maps](#) above.)

The [Summer Institute of Linguistics](#) did research in Tojolabal many years ago and has now concluded its work there. The remainder of SIL work in these languages was carried out in Guatemala, and the results have not been included on this site.

Publications by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its members (Tojolabal)

Linguistics

- vocabulary
- analyzed texts

Literacy and literature

- primers
- books of traditional stories and other native-authored literature
- health pamphlets
- [New Testament \(Tojolabal\)](#)

Various fields

- technical articles

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Quichean-Mamean subfamily

Aguacateco, Cakchiquel, Ixil, Kekchí, Mam, Pokomam, Pokomchí, Quiché and others

The languages of the Quichean-Mamean subfamily are spoken primarily in Guatemala, although there are also speakers of some of them in the Mexican state of Chiapas. (See [the maps](#) above.) The Quichean languages include Achí, Cakchiquel, Kekchí, Pokomam, Pokomchí, Quiché, Sacapulteco, Sipacapense, Tzutujil, and Uspanteco. The Mamean languages include Aguacateco, Ixil, Mam, Tacaneco, and Tectiteco (Teco).

Investigations by the Summer Institute of Linguistics into these languages

have been done in Guatemala, and the results are not included on this site.

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