

## THE LACANDÓN SONG OF THE JAGUAR

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Some fifty years ago, Phillip and Mary Baer (1948) published “Lacandón Song of the Jaguar,” a brief Lacandón (Maya) text, dictated by Mateo García of the Pethá region. The Baers noted that the song was sung “when a person meets a jaguar (tigre) on the trail in the jungle,” that the rhythm of the song imitated the walk of the jaguar, and that it was believed that on hearing the song the jaguar would go away. The brief text (48 words) was presented in numbered sentences, with run-on lines, without special formatting. Both a literal and a free translation followed the text; the latter sketched the story line (the orthography has been changed slightly from the original):

### THE SONG

1. jujuntsit in jitik in wok 2. jujuntsit in jitik in k'äb 3. tan u pek in nej 4. tin wu'uyaj u tar a k'ay ch'iknach 5. netak in wenen 6. tin käshtaj u pachtäkih che? 7. oken tin wenen yokor jenen che? 8. tu yek'er in nok' tu yek'er in k'äb 9. tu yek'er in shikin.

### LITERAL TRANSLATION

1. Each I lift-up my back-feet 2. Each I lift-up my front-feet 3. Continually it moves my tail 4. I heard it come your voice very-far 5. Very-almost I sleep 6. I looked-for its back-fell tree 7. Went-I I slept on fallen tree 8. Its stripes my hide its stripes my front-feet 9. Its stripes my ears.

## FREE TRANSLATION

I pick up each of my feet and let them fall on the trail. My tail moves. I heard your voice come from a distance. I am sleepy. I searched for a fallen tree to go to sleep. I went to sleep on the fallen tree. My hide and feet and ears are striped.

Since the publication of this text, knowledge of Mayan languages has increased dramatically and scholarly interest has expanded to include questions of discourse, that is, text structure beyond the sentence. Work began with texts from many modern languages and continued with Classic Period hieroglyphic inscriptions, as the writing system began to be deciphered (Josserand 1991). Studies of this literary tradition have identified a number of rhetorical devices used in both kinds of texts to highlight or background information, or create and sustain dramatic tension (Hopkins and Josserand 1990). Thus, we can expect to find, in a well-formed text, couplets or paired lines (AA, BB), which may be “nested” in chiasmic form (ABBA). Triplets (AAA) may also occur, especially at critical points in a narrative. Distinct sections of a text may have distinct syntactic patterns as well as distinct topics and content. With these models in mind, it is instructive to revisit the *Song of the Jaguar* and examine its composition as well as its content.

The patterns of syntax indicate that the text has three sections, each with a distinct form to match its distinct content. The first verse consists of a couplet played against a single line, AAB. The second verse has two intercalated couplets, CDCD. The third and final verse consists of a triplet, EEE. In content, the text is a magical charm, designed to convert a stalking jaguar into a sleeping one. In the first section, the jaguar is stalking its prey, and the rhythm of the language imitates the stalk of the cat. In the second section, the rhythm is broken as the song is heard and the jaguar gets sleepy. The language of this section alternates between action and result (hearing the song and getting sleepy; finding a tree and going to sleep). In the final section, the jaguar is asleep and dreaming, and the language imitates the deep breathing of a sleeping, dreaming jaguar.

It is evident from this example that even a very brief text can have an elegant structure. Furthermore, it is clear that new insights can be derived from old reports, and we can still benefit from careful reporting by earlier scholars.

Here, the text is retranscribed, formatted, and translated:

## LACANDÓN SONG OF THE JAGUAR

Ju-jun tsit in jitik in wok.	Step by step I move my feet.
Ju-jun tsit in jitik in k'äb.	Step by step I move my paws.
Tan u pek in nej.	My tail is twitching.
Tin wu'uyaj u tar a k'ay ch'iknach.	I heard your song coming from afar.
Netak in wenen.	I'm getting sleepy.
Tin käxtaj u pachtäkij che'.	I looked for a fallen tree (to lie on).
Oken tin wenen yokor jenen che'.	I'm going to sleep on that (fallen) tree.
Tu yek'er in nok'.	My hide is spotted.
Tu yek'er in k'äb.	My paws are spotted.
Tu yek'er in xikin.	My ears are spotted.

*References*

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*Resumen*

Nicholas A. Hopkins presenta un nuevo análisis de una breve pero sumamente interesante canción lacandona. Originalmente publicado en 1948 por Phillip Baer y Mary Baer en esta misma revista, Hopkins vuelve ahora a revisar el texto desde los nuevos lineamientos de análisis para las lenguas mayenses, en específico atendiendo las cuestiones de estructura que van más allá de la oración y los mecanismos retóricos utilizados para resaltar información o crear y sostener una tensión dramática. Con base en ello, el autor determina la división del texto en tres secciones —a diferencia del acomodo lineal que Baer y Baer habían hecho—, encontrando que cada sección representa no sólo una temática sino un contexto diferentes. Como él mismo lo señala, este es un ejemplo más de la importancia de retomar viejos trabajos y refrescarlos con nuevas posturas metodológicas de análisis.