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Cabécar – a Chibchan language of Costa Rica

Abstract

This article presents an overview of Cabécar, an indigenous language of Costa Rica spoken in the Talamanca Mountain Range. The language is endangered in that many young ethnic Cabécars exclusively speak Spanish. From a linguistic point of view, Cabécar possesses a number of outstanding characteristics, which are the subject of this article.

1. Introduction: The language and its speakers¹

Cabécar is the name of a language spoken by an indigenous population living in the Talamanca mountain range of Costa Rica. More recent statements regarding the number of speakers vary to a considerable degree: while Margery Peña (1985a: 131, 1991: 121, 1989/2003: xi) mentions between 2000 and 3000 speakers, Lewis (ed.) 2009 reports the number of 8840 speakers in the year 2000. The official census from the year 2000 mentions 9861 ethnic Cabécars of which approximately 85% identify themselves as speaking the language (Solano 2002).

There are four enclaves in the Talamanca mountain range of Costa Rica where Cabécar is spoken: Chirripó, La Estrella, and San José Cabécar, all three located at the Atlantic side of the mountain range in the province of Limón, and Ujarrás, located at the Pacific side of the mountain range in the province of Puntarenas (Margery Peña 1991: 121, 1989/2003: xi, see Figure 1). In general people of these four regions do not have much contact to each other so that the varieties of the language spoken may differ to a considerable degree. Margery Peña (1989/2003) identifies two main dialects on the basis of phonological, morpho-syntactic and lexical characteristics, namely a northern

¹ This article is based on fieldwork carried out in Ujarrás (Costa Rica) in April 2009 and July/August 2010. The fieldwork was financially supported by the *German Academic Exchange Service* (DAAD) and the *Universidad Nacional Costa Rica* (PROLIBCA, Programa de Lenguas Indígenas de la Baja Centroamérica) which is gratefully acknowledged. I am greatly indebted to my Cabécar consultants. Furthermore, I would like to thank Diego Quesada, Stavros Skopeteas and an anonymous reviewer for very helpful comments.

dialect spoken in the areas of Chirripó and La Estrella, and a southern dialect spoken in Ujarrás and San José Cabécar.

Furthermore, while the communities of San José Cabécar and Ujarrás are quite easily accessible, this does not hold for the communities located in the Chirripó area. So speakers in San José Cabécar and Ujarrás are mostly bilingual with Spanish (even the elder ones) while it is reported that in the Chirripó regions there is a considerable number of monolinguals.² In those communities with easy access from the outside, younger speakers and children often do not speak Cabécar anymore. This holds true irrespective of the fact that the language is taught at primary school in these communities.³ Thus, the language seems to be under the threat of extinction – at least in these communities. Regarding the absolute number of speakers, chances for a longer term survival of the language are not very high.



² While Margery Peña (1989/2003: xi) reports that most Cabécar speakers are bilingual with Spanish, Lewis (ed.) 2009 gives the number of 80% of monolinguals.

³ Since 1996 the Costa Rican Ministry of Education is undertaking a programme to support teaching of the indigenous languages in primary school (Solano 2002).

Figure 1: Geographic distribution

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mapa_cab%C3%A9car.png#filelinks]

Cabécar is one of six Chibchan languages spoken in Costa Rica (see Margery Peña 1989/2003: xi, Quesada 2007). Next to Cabécar, there are indigenous communities speaking Guatuso, Bribri, Teribe, Guaymí, and Bocotá (Buglere). Genetically, Cabécar belongs to the Isthmian branch of the Chibchan language family. Together with its closest sister Bribri it forms the Viceita branch of the Isthmian languages (see Table 1).

Group/Language		Country
Paya (Pech)		Honduras
Southern	Pota	Nicaragua
	Rama	Nicaragua
Guatuso		Costa Rica
Isthmian	Viceita	Cabécar
		Bribri
Boruca (†)		Costa Rica
Teribe		Panama, Costa Rica
Guaymian	Guaymí	Panama, Costa Rica
	Bocotá (Buglere)	Panama, Costa Rica
Doracic	Chánguena †	Costa Rica, Panama
	Dorasque †	Panama
Cuna (Kuna)		Panama, Colombia
Magdalenian	Boyacan	Muisca †
		Duit †
		Tunebo
Arhuacan	Kogui (Kogi)	Colombia
	Ika	Colombia
	Damana	Colombia
	Atanques †	Colombia
Chimila		Colombia
Barí		Colombia, Venezuela

Table 1: The Chibchan Language Family (adapted from Constenla 1991, Quesada 2007)⁴

The genetic arrangement of the languages in Table 1 corresponds to their geographic distribution quite neatly, extending from the northernmost members of the family, Paya in Honduras and Rama in Nicaragua, over the Isthmian languages in Costa Rica and Panama to the Magdalenian languages of Colombia and Venezuela.

2. History of investigation⁵

⁴ Languages marked with † are extinct.

In the second half of the 19th century, first studies about the indigenous languages of Costa Rica, also referring to Cabécar, are published, written by Spanish-, English-, and German-speaking scholars (see Scherzer 1855, Gabb 1875, Thiel 1882, Fernández Guardia & Fernández Ferraz 1892). Research continues in the 20th century with works by Lehmann 1920 and Shuller 1928.

Since the late 70s, Cabécar has been investigated intensively by linguists at the University of Costa Rica, most prominently by Enrique Margery Peña who published numerous articles about diverse aspects of the Cabécar language including phonological, morphological, morpho-syntactic, and lexical aspects. His work on the language culminated in the publication of the comprehensive lexicon *Diccionario cabécar – español, español – cabécar* (Margery Peña 1989/2003) which is the most important source for this language until today. It comprises a thorough lexicographical study of the language, taking into account the currently spoken Cabécar in all language areas in Costa Rica. The lexicon is accompanied by a grammatical introduction which describes the basic properties of the parts of speech in the language. It is also Margery Peña who established an orthography for Cabécar which is now officially accepted in the language community (Margery Peña 1985a).

Furthermore, there are a number of specific studies on diverse aspects of Cabécar grammar including its phonology, morphology, and syntax. The first study of the phonology of Cabécar is Jones & Jones (1959), followed by articles by Bourland (1975) and Margery Peña (1982, 1985a). Verbal morphology is studied in Jones (1974, 1983) and Margery Peña (1985d). Diverse aspects of nominal morphology are dealt with in Bertoglia (1983) and Margery Peña (1983, 1985b, 1985c, 1985e). A syntactic account of Cabécar is provided in Bourland (1974). Studies dealing with lexical and/or semantic aspects of Cabécar include Camacho-Zamora (1983) with emphasis on ethno-botanical vocabulary, Margery Peña (1984) with emphasis on ethno-ornithological vocabulary, and Hernández Poveda (1992) with emphasis on kinship terminology. Furthermore, there are Cabécar texts and text collections available such as Varas & Fernández (1989), Margery Peña (1986a, 1995), and also studies on indigenous text genres and music (Cervantes 1991, Constenla Umaña 1996, Margery Peña 1986b, 1989, 1991). Finally, Quesada (1999, 2007) analyses Cabécar in a comparative Chibchan perspective discussing issues at all grammatical levels with a special emphasis on participant alignment and participant marking.

Still, nowadays the Chibchan languages are only poorly considered in general comparative linguistic research due to the fact that comprehensive reference grammars are missing or have been completed only recently (see Quesada 2000 on Teribe, Quesada 2007 for a comparative study of Chibchan). For other Chibchan languages reference grammars are available in Spanish (e.g. Constenla & Margery Peña 1978, 1979 for

⁵ Work on this chapter was facilitated by a bibliography of scientific works on Cabécar provided by Guillermo González Campos, Universidad de Costa Rica.

Bribri, CIDCA-Craig 1990 for Rama, Constenla 1999 for Guatuso, Quesada-Pacheco 2008 for Panamanian Guaymi, Murillo *forthc.* for Costa Rican Guaymi, Quesada *forthc.* for Buglere). Given the fact that there is no reference grammar for Cabécar and that most more specific works are published in Spanish, the language is still not accessible to the wider non-Spanish-speaking part of the linguistic community.

3. Some grammatical characteristics

3.1. General

This grammatical characterization is based on the works that have been published on Cabécar grammar, in particular Margery Peña (1989/2003) as well as on own fieldwork in Ujarrás undertaken in April 2009 and July/August 2010.⁶

Cabécar morphology displays a high degree of allomorphy and fusion in the verbal domain where categories such as voice, diverse aspect and mood categories, and verbal number are highly fusional (see Section 3.3.2). In the nominal domain, morphology is limited, since case relations and plural are encoded through unbound formatives (see various examples in Section 3.3). The only nominal inflectional category which displays a high degree of fusion is numeral classification (see examples in (4)).

As regards a syntactic characterization, Cabécar is a head-final language, i.e. the head generally follows its dependent: verbs strictly follow their direct object, adpositions are postpositions and the possessed follows its possessor. Furthermore, Cabécar is a dependent-marking language, i.e. the dependent is morphologically marked for the relation to its head. This holds for the arguments and adjuncts of a verb the relation of which is marked through postpositions. Apart from postpositional marking syntactic relations are expressed through word order.

The following paragraphs introduce to some basic grammatical properties of Cabécar in the domains of phonology, morphology, and syntax.

3.2. Phonology

⁶ The author is currently working on the grammar of Cabécar in collaboration with Christian Lehmann (University of Erfurt) and Stavros Skopeteas (University of Bielefeld). The results of this collaboration are currently compiled in an Online Documentation of Cabécar, see <http://www.christianlehmann.eu/ling/sprachen/cabecar/index.html> (access date 27.09.2010). If not otherwise indicated examples illustrating Cabécar grammatical phenomena stem from fieldwork in Ujarrás.

One of the remarkable characteristics of the Cabécar vowel system is the systematic opposition between oral and nasal vowels. Cabécar displays two series of vowels as shown in the Table 2 (see Margery Peña 1989/2003: xvi–xvii). There are seven oral vowels and five nasal vowels which largely correspond to each other in their position on the horizontal (position of tongue: front – back) and vertical (degree of opening: close – open) axes. In contrast to the nasal vowels, the oral vowels display a distinction between close mid (i.e. /ɪ/, /ʏ/) and mid vowels (i.e. /ɛ/, /ɔ/) both in the front and in the back axis respectively. Table 2 indicates orthographic representations in angle brackets in those cases where they differ from the phonemic representations.

	Oral vowels		Nasal vowels	
	front	back	front	back
close	/i/	/u/	/ĩ/, <i>	/ũ/, <u>
close mid	/ɪ/, <ë>	/ʏ/, <ö>		
mid	/ɛ/, <e>	/ɔ/, <o>	/ẽ/, <ẽ>	/õ/, <õ>
open		/a/		/ã/, <a>

Table 2: Vowels

Figure 2 shows a plot of F1 and F2 frequencies of 8 instances of the 7 oral vowels produced by a female native speaker. F1 values correspond to the degree of opening in Table 2: close vowels have low F1, open vowels have high F1. The degree of vowel frontness/backness is reflected in F2 frequencies: front vowels are characterized by high F2 while back vowels show low F2. For each vowel we selected two words which were recorded 4 times (= 8 measurements per vowel).⁷ The variation visible for each vowel phoneme is expected as is the overlap of the spaces of F1/F2 values for neighbouring vowels, i.e. /ɪ/ (<ë>) and /ɛ/ (<e>), and /ʏ/ (<ö>) and /ɔ/ (<o>).⁸ Figure 2 indicates that the vowels labeled as mid and close-mid in Table 2 are articulated with a similar F1 value range, i.e. with a similar degree of opening on the vertical axis.

⁷ The following lexical items were used (the measured vowel is indicated in bold): <a> *dawá* ‘brother-in-law’, *bata* ‘peak’; <e> *jé* ‘that’, *sérsö* ‘person’; <ë> *pě* ‘people’, *běchí* ‘devil’; <i> *jí* ‘this’, *dí* ‘chicha’; <u> *kugö* ‘roast’, *jula* ‘hand, arm’; <ö> *sérsö* ‘person’, *sögötö* ‘start’; <o> *óshkoro* ‘hen’. The diacritic <˘> on vowels indicates a pitch accent. Generally, pitch accent bearing syllables are stressed and are realized with a rising pitch contour. The exact phonetic correlates of this accent and the interaction with several tonal environments need further investigation.

⁸ Note that the consonantal environment of the vowels was not controlled, which increases the variation as visible in Figure 2.

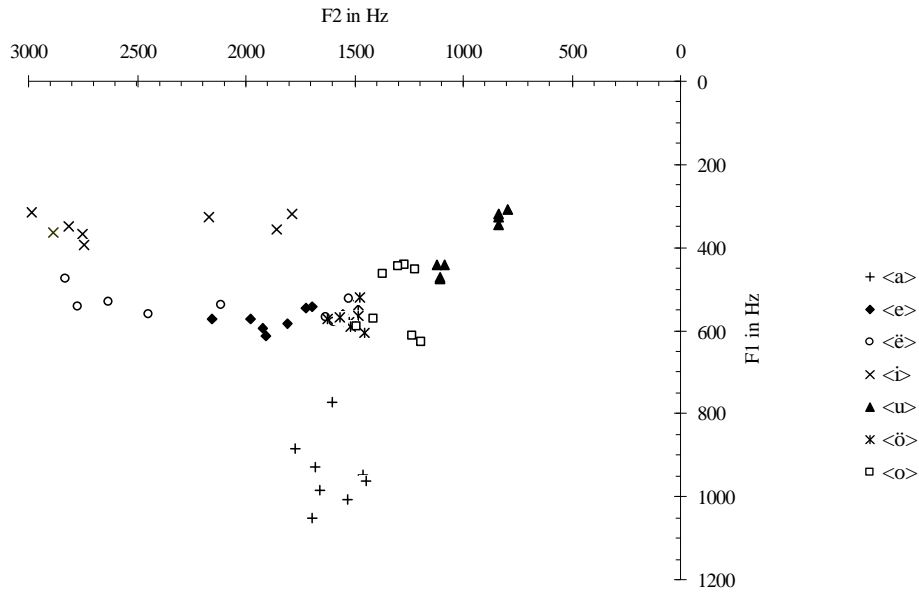


Figure 2: Vowel formants (F1, F2)

The Cabécar consonant system consists of 14 consonants with phoneme status (see Table 3). These may occur with different phonetic realizations dependent on the phonetic context in which they appear. As Table 3 shows, there are six plosives, of which four come in voiced – voiceless pairs, namely /p/ vs. /b/ and /t/ vs. /d/. The velar consonant /k/ may be realized voiceless or voiced dependent on its immediate phonetic environment. Furthermore, Cabécar has three affricates (i.e. /ts/, and the voiceless – voiced pair /tʃ/ and /dʒ/) and three voiceless fricatives /s/, /ʃ/, and /h/. As concerns nasal consonants, only the velar nasal /ŋ/ is considered to have phoneme status while [m], [n], and [ɲ] are analyzed as prenasal allophonic realizations of the phonemes /b/, /d/, and /dʒ/, respectively (see Margery Peña 1982, 1989/2003: xxii). Finally, Cabécar has a liquid retroflex phoneme /ɽ/ which is generally realized as a tap.

	Place of articulation	bi-labial	dental / alveolar	dental / velar	retro-flex	alveolar / palatal	velar	glottal
plosive	voiceless	p	t	t̪			k	
	voiced	b	d					
affricate	voiceless		ts			tʃ		
	voiced					dʒ		
fricative	voiceless		s			ʃ		h
nasal							ŋ	
liquid					ɽ			

Table 3: Consonants

3.3. Morphology and syntax

3.3.1. Nominal grammar

The Cabécar noun phrase can be formed by a noun or a pronoun. A noun may either constitute a noun phrase on its own or may be accompanied by modifiers such as adjectives or determiners such as demonstratives. In the following, pronouns are addressed first followed by nouns and their modifiers and determiners.

The Cabécar paradigm of personal pronouns is represented in Table 4. The singular forms of the first and third person appear in two forms: a full form and a short clitic form, as indicated in Table 3. Furthermore, there is a distinction between exclusive first person plural and inclusive first person plural. The pronoun *sá* excludes the hearer(s) from the group of persons referred to while *sé* includes them. Next to the third person pronouns given in Table 4, there is the pronoun *sa* which is exclusively used for anaphoric reference to human beings.

Person	Number	singular	plural
1. exclusive		<i>yís ~ s</i>	<i>sá</i>
	inclusive		<i>sé</i>
2.		<i>bá</i>	<i>bás</i>
3.		<i>jié ~ i</i>	<i>jiéwá</i>

Table 4: Personal pronouns

The personal pronouns do not show variation conditioned by their syntactic function. Thus, the same forms occur independent of whether the pronoun has possessive (1a), subject (1b) or object function (1c).

- (1a) *yís* *míŋa*
 1.SG mother
 ‘my mother’ (Margery Peña 1989/2003: xliii)
- (1b) *Yís* *të* *Carlos* *shkawá.*
 1.SG ERG Carlos hit:PFV
 ‘I hit Carlos’
- (1c) *Carlos* *të* *yís* *shkawá.*
 Carlos ERG 1.SG hit:PFV
 ‘Carlos hit me.’

Table 3 shows that plural formation is not regular in the paradigm of personal pronouns. In the third person, the morpheme *wá* indicates plural. *Wá* also indicates plurality with nouns. It follows the noun or a modifying postnominal adjective (2a). However, number

marking is not obligatory. Thus, a noun not marked with *wá* is not necessarily interpreted as singular, i.e. as referring to a single item of the class denoted by the noun. It is rather unspecified for number so that there may be an ambiguity as to singular vs. plural reference as in (2b).

- (2a) *míchi (dolóna) wá*
 cat (black) PL
 ‘the (black) cats’
- (2b) *Óshkoro köpö-gé.*
 hen sleep-HAB
 ‘(The/A) hen(s) is/are sleeping.’

Number marking is sensitive to the animacy hierarchy (see Margery Peña 1989/2003: xliii), in a way that is in line with facts known from other languages (see Smith-Stark 1974; Corbett 2000: 54–132). With (full) pronouns, number marking is obligatory (see Table 4). The same holds for human animates if they are referential as in (3a). With non-human animates and inanimates number marking may be optional as in (2b) and (3b)).

- (3a) *Yaba wöbötsö i kága wá suwa.*
 child like 3 father PL see:INF
 ‘The child likes to see his parents.’
- (3b) *Páiglö (wá) dö paskulë.*
 shirt PL COP washed
 ‘The shirts are washed/clean.’

Nominal categories such as gender or definiteness, which are well-known from Indo-European languages, do not occur in Cabécar.⁹ Next to number, nominal class plays a role in Cabécar nominal grammar, more specifically in the formation of numerals. Numeral classifiers occur with numerals as can be seen in (4). They are selected according to the semantic class of the counted noun. Cabécar distinguishes six noun classes: neutral entities (including humans) (see (4a)), round entities (4b), long entities (4c), flat entities (4d), containers (4e), groups/portions (4f). The class of neutral entities is the unmarked member of the contrast, i.e., all entities can be used with this class (for more details see Margery Peña 1989/2003: xlvii).

⁹ In the Isthmian languages, definiteness distinctions are conveyed at the (morpho-)syntactic level, i.e. by overt plural marking and/or different positions of quantifiers and numerals (D. Quesada, p.c.). This issue needs further investigation in Cabécar.

- (4a) *aláglöwa églá / ból / mañál /*
 woman one:CLF.NEUT two:CLF.NEUT three:CLF.NEUT
tkél / skél
 four:CLF.NEUT five:CLF.NEUT
 ‘one/two/three/four/five woman/women’
- (4b) *ják églá wö / ból wö / mañál wö /*
 stone one CLF.ROUND two CLF.ROUND three CLF.ROUND
tkél wö / skél wö
 four CLF.ROUND five CLF.ROUND
 ‘one/two/three/four/five stone/stones’
- (4c) *míchi étaba / bótabö / mañátabö /*
 cat one:CLF.LONG two:CLF.LONG three:CLF.LONG
tkétabö / skétabö
 four:CLF.LONG five:CLF.LONG
 ‘one/two/three/four/five cat/cats’
- (4d) *óshkoro étka / bótkö / mañátkö /*
 hen one:CLF.FLAT two:CLF.FLAT three:CLF.FLAT
tkétkö / skétkö
 four:CLF.FLAT five:CLF.FLAT
 ‘one/two/three/four/five hen/hens’
- (4e) *kököblë éyaka / bóyökö / mañá yaka /*
 basket one:CLF.CONT two:CLF.CONT three:CLF.CONT
tkél yökö / skél yökö
 four CLF.CONT five CLF.CONT
 ‘one/two/three/four/five basket/baskets’
- (4f) *tsalá éлга / bóлга / mañálга /*
 banana one:CLF.PORT two:CLF.PORT three:CLF.PORT
tkélга / skélга
 four:CLF.PORT five:CLF.PORT
 ‘one/two/three/four/five bunch(es) of bananas’

The Cabécar numeral system is quinary, i.e. it uses the number five as a basic unit in its counting system.¹⁰ Numbers higher than five are construed by addition (by means of *kí* ‘plus’) or multiplication (by means of postponing the respective number word) using *sá jula* lit.: ‘our hand’ as basic unit, as illustrated in example (5).

- (5) *móglö sá jula bótkö kí mañátabö.*
 gun 1.PL.EXCL hand two:CLF.FLAT plus three:CLF.LONG
 ‘thirteen guns’ (Margery Peña 1989/2003: 1)

¹⁰ See Pittier de Fábrega (1904) for a very early account of the numeral systems in the indigenous languages of Costa Rica.

As is evident from (5), the numeral classifiers are chosen according to the class of the counted entity, i.e. *bótkö* relates to *sá jula* ‘our hand’ and takes the classifier for flat entities while *mañátabö* directly relates to the counted entity *móglö* ‘gun’ and thus takes the classifier for long entities.

While definiteness is not morphologically marked in the Cabécar noun phrase, there are a number of demonstrative determiners that combine with nouns to form a noun phrase. Following Margery Peña (1989/2003: xliv) Cabécar demonstratives are distinguished according to the parameters of visibility of the determined entity by the speaker and its location with respect to the speaker, as indicated in Table 5. The location of the entity includes its distance with respect to the speaker and, for distal entities, its position at the same, a superior or inferior level with respect to the speaker.

Location	proximal		distal			
	close	near	far			
Distance speaker						
Level speaker			same	superior	inferior	
Visibility	visible	<i>jí</i>	<i>jé</i>	<i>jamí jé</i>	<i>jöt jé</i>	<i>diá jé</i>
	non-visible			<i>ñéwa</i>		

Table 5: Demonstratives

The position of the demonstrative with respect to the noun is not fixed but varies according to factors that still have to be detected. Margery Peña (1989/2003: xliv) identifies the postnominal position of the demonstratives as the basic one, but the reverse order equally occurs in texts and elicitation as can be seen in (6b).

- (6a) *Yaba jí kie José.*
 child PROX be.called Jose
 ‘This child is called José.’ (Margery Peña 1989/2003: xlv)
- (6b) *Jí ksë dö ksë -na jir.*
 PROX song COP sing-MID.INF today
 ‘This song should be sung today.’

The possessive noun phrase is formed by juxtaposition of possessor and possessed in that order (7). The possessor phrase can be formed by a noun (7b) or a pronoun (7a) and can itself be complex, e.g. a possessive noun phrase as in (7c). In contrast to many other languages, Cabécar does not structurally distinguish between different kinds of possessive relations, juxtaposition being the only structural means to indicate a possessive relationship in the nominal domain. The possessive construction can be lexicalized resulting in a compound as in (7d).

- (7a) *yís mína*
 1.SG mother
 ‘my mother’

- (7b) *José mǐnǎ*
 J. mother
 ‘José’s mother’
- (7c) *yís mǐnǎ ju*
 1.SG mother house
 ‘my mother’s house’
- (7d) *ju kö*
 house door
 ‘door (of the house)’

3.3.2. Verbal grammar

The Cabécar verb phrase consists of a verb and its dependents, i.e. complements and/or adjuncts. There are intransitive (2b) and transitive verbs (3a) as well as copular verbs (3b). Cabécar has two copular verbs: *dö* (which has as an allomorphic variant *rö* when following a vowel) and *tsó*. The copula *dö* is used to form a predicate with an adjective or a noun (phrase) as in (8a, b). Similarly, the copula *tsó* can combine with an adjective as in (8c). The semantic difference between *dö* and *tsó* corresponds to the difference between Spanish ‘ser’ and ‘estar’. While *dö* is used for properties, *tsó* is used as a copula with adjectives conveying a state.

- (8a) *Jí ju dö kéyegé.*
 PROX house COP big
 ‘This house is big.’
- (8b) *Oló dö du.*
 vulture COP bird
 ‘The vulture is a bird.’
- (8c) *jié tsó dawë*
 3.SG COP ill
 ‘he is ill’ (Margery Peña 1989/2003: lxix)

Next to its function as a copular, *tsó* fulfils further grammatical tasks, i.e. it functions as an existential verb (9a) and forms the progressive aspect with full verbs (9b). Both *dö* and *tsó* are defective in their conjugation paradigms, however *tsó* possesses a suppletive past form *báklë /báklö* (9c) and a negative form *kúnǎ* (9d).

- (9a) *Jú nǎ díglö tsó.*
 pot in water COP
 ‘There is water in the stew pot.’
- (9b) *Jiéwá tsó köpö.*
 3.PL COP sleep
 ‘They are sleeping.’

(9c) *sá báklë ksö*
 1.PL COP:PFV sing
 ‘we were singing’ (Margery Peña 2003: lxxxv)

(9d) *bá chéga ká kúná díglö ska*
 2.SG friend NEG COP.NEG water in
 ‘my friend wasn’t in the river’ (Margery Peña 1989/2003: lxx)

Next to the existential verb, Cabécar possesses a number of positional verbs which indicate body positions of animate and inanimate entities. To these belong *dúl* ‘stand, be upright’, *tkél/tkátkë* ‘sit, be seated’, *tél/mél* ‘lie’, *jar* ‘hang’, *kulë wa* ‘lean’ (see Margery Peña 1989/2003: lxvi–lxviii).

(10a) *Jiéwá mél köpö.*
 3.PL lie sleep
 ‘They lie sleeping.’

(10b) *bá páiglö mél yís jaká kíga*
 2.SG skirt lie 1.SG bed on
 ‘your skirt is on my bed’

While the aforementioned functional verbs are defective in their paradigms, the full inventory of inflectional categories marked on lexical verbs includes aspect, mood, polarity, and verbal number.¹¹ The category person is not coded in the verb, i.e. there are no agreement or cross-reference markers on the verb. Rather, person is coded through nouns or personal pronouns alone. The Cabécar verb distinguishes a number of aspect/mood categories among them imperfective, perfective, habitual, potential, assu-
 rative (future), perfect, and pluperfect. The following examples illustrate the basic forms: imperfective (11a) and perfective (11b).

(11a) *Yís të yaba suwé.*
 1.SG ERG child see:IPFV
 ‘I see the child.’

(11b) *Yís të yaba suwá.*
 1.SG ERG child see:PFV
 ‘I saw the child.’

The habitual, assu-
 rative (future), and potential are construed on the basis of the imper-
 fective form, as illustrated in (12)

(12a) *Yís të yaba suwé-gé.*
 1.SG ERG child see:IPFV-HAB
 ‘I (generally) see the child.’

¹¹ Margery Peña (1989/2003, ch. 2.3) describes the verbal categories as additionally involving the notion of tense, e.g. the perfective is defined in terms of occurrence anterior to the moment of utterance. This issue needs further examination.

- (12b) *Yís tĕ yaba suwĕ-rá.*
 1.SG ERG child see:IPFV-ASS
 ‘I will see the child.’
- (12c) *Yís tĕ yaba suwĕ-mĭ.*
 1.SG ERG child see:IPFV-POT
 ‘I may see the child.’

Further aspectual and modal meanings are coded by means of auxiliaries, i.e. the progressive (see (9b) above), prospective (13a), obligative (13b), and desiderative (13c). Note that in these auxiliary constructions, the agent/actor is not marked by the ergative postposition. For a detailed discussion of such constructions see Verhoeven (2010).

- (13a) *Yís mā yaba suwā.*
 1.SG go child see:INF
 ‘I am going to see the child.’
- (13b) *Yís káwōta i suwā.*
 1.SG must 3 see:INF
 ‘I have to see it.’ (Margery Peña 1989/2003: Ixxxvii)
- (13c) *Yís kiana i suwā.*
 1.SG want 3 see:INF
 ‘I want to see it.’

As concerns voice distinctions, the Cabécar verb distinguishes between an active voice and a middle voice. The middle form of the verb is directed to the undergoer (patient) as its sole argument. The middle voice displays similar aspect/mood distinctions to the active voice. Transitive as well as intransitive verbs possess middle forms, as is illustrated in (14).

- (14a) *Jir ksĕ nā barama.*
 today sing:MID:INF nice
 ‘Today they sing nicely.’
- (14b) *Konó suná yíkí.*
 tepezcuintle see:MID:PFV yesterday
 ‘The tepezcuintle was seen yesterday.’

Furthermore, the Cabécar verb may be marked for verbal number, a category not known in Indo-European languages, but for example present in other Amerindian languages as e.g. Huichol. Verbal number quantifies the event expressed by the verb, indicating that it occurs more than once. This generally implies that it involves more than one subject or object. Thus, although the object in (15b) is not marked for plurality, it is inferred that the hunter sees more than one tepezcuintle. Note that this inference is defeasible, so that – dependent on the context – the sentence can also mean that the event expressed by the verb occurred more than once with respect to the same object or with respect to a generic object (see Skopeteas 2010 for a detailed analysis of verbal plurality in Cabé-

car). The verbal plural form is derived from the verb *tulá-mí* ‘throw-AVERS’ (alternatively *tulá-sá* ‘throw-ELAT’), which still exist as independent verbs in the language.

- (15a) *Yëria tē kōnó suwá.*
 hunter ERG tepezcuintle see:PFV
 ‘The hunter saw (one or more) tepezcuintle.’
- (15b) *Yëria tē kōnó suwá-tulámí.*
 hunter ERG tepezcuintle see:PFV-V.PL
 ‘The hunter saw more than one tepezcuintle.’
 ‘The hunter saw a tepezcuintle more than once.’

Finally, lexical verbs can be followed by so-called postverbs which are enclitics and indicate meanings related to movement and direction. The following items belong to the class of postverbs: (*j*)u associates with movement verbs, *ka* encodes an ascending movement, *tē* indicates that a movement will reach a defined point, *mí* combines with verbs encoding a movement away from the agent, *sá* occurs with verbs of separation, *ne* encodes a backward/reverse movement (see Margery Peña 1989/2003: lxxi). Example (16) illustrates the use of some of these postverbs. Note that the postverbs do not occupy a single position, but they can be combined, as illustrated in (16a).

- (16a) *jayë wa mane-ulu=mí=ne*
 man go.PFV-V.PL=AVERS=REVERS
 ‘many men went away and back’
- (16b) *Pedro dö wá=ju ju járga*
 P. enter.PFV=MOT house within
 ‘Peter entered the house’

3.3.3. The clause

Cabécar uses postpositions for the coding of participant relations such as agent, recipient, experiencer, instrument, comitative, etc. The only participant of an intransitive verb (17b) and the patient of a transitive verb occur without a postposition (17a). The agent of a transitive verb is marked by the ergative postposition, which is *tē/te* in affirmative and *wá* in negative contexts.

- (17a) *Yís mīnā tē i ktawá.*
 1.SG mother ERG 3 kill:PFV
 ‘My mother killed it (recently).’
- (17b) *I duwáwá.*
 3 die:PFV
 ‘(S)he died.’

Postpositions occur at the right edge of the NP, i.e. they follow the noun including postnominal modifiers and determiners. The following examples illustrate further postposi-

tions: the dative postposition adjoins recipients (18a), the comitative postposition adjoins companions (18b), the instrumental postposition adjoins instruments (18c). Furthermore, there are a number of local postpositions such as the locative *ska* ‘in’, the lative *na* ‘in, to, from’, the adessive *mi* ‘near’, and the superessive *gi* ‘above, in’. Both the local and the non-local postpositions are more abstract in their meaning than their labels suggest, i.e. they convey further semantic roles.

- (18a) *Carlos të jayekúo kágömá Pedro ia.*
 Carlos ERG book donate:PFV Pedro DAT
 ‘Carlos donated a book to Pedro.’
- (18b) *Yís mā yë bölö yís el da.*
 1.SG go hunt 1.SG brother COM
 ‘I will go hunting with my brother.’ (Margery Peña 1989/2003: cxi)
- (18c) *S páiglö wötená jíshökö wa.*
 1.SG shirt dirty:PFV earth INS
 ‘My shirt got dirtied with earth.’

The position of the object of a transitive verb and the main participant of an intransitive verb is fixed with respect to the verb: both are strictly left adjacent to the verb. For the other members of the clause there is greater positional freedom. The agent of a transitive verb may either precede the ‘object-verb’ complex or occur in the postverbal domain (19).

- (19a) *Carlos të yís shkawá.*
 Carlos ERG 1.SG hit:PFV
 ‘Carlos hit me.’
- (19b) *Yís shkawá Carlos të.*
 1.SG hit:PFV Carlos ERG.
 ‘Carlos hit me.’

4. Summary

This article has given a short overview of some basic grammatical properties of the Chibchan language Cabécar. Cabécar is a head-final language with ergative alignment in the coding of participants. Instead of case marking, the language has a set of postpositions to indicate participant relations. Verbal morphology is relatively complex encoding categories such as voice, diverse aspect and mood categories, polarity, and verbal number. In the nominal domain, morphology is less complex but characterized by the use of numeral classifiers in the formation of count constructions. At the level of phonology, the systematic opposition between oral and nasal vowels and the general prominence of nasalization are characteristic of Cabécar.

Abbreviations

ASS	ASSURATIVE	EXCL	EXCLUSIVE	NEUT	NEUTRAL
AVERS	AVERSIVE	HAB	HABITUAL	PL	PLURAL
CLF	CLASSIFIER	IPFV	IMPERFECTIVE	PORT	PORTION
COM	COMITATIVE	INF	INFINITIVE	POT	POTENTIAL
CONT	CONTAINER	INS	INSTRUMENTAL	PROX	PROXIMAL
COP	COPULA	MID	MIDDLE VOICE	PFV	PERFECTIVE
DAT	DATIVE	MOT	MOTIVE	REVERS	REVERSIVE
ERG	ERGATIVE	NEG	NEGATION	SG	SINGULAR
				V	VERBAL

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