

## Non-canonical gender in Mopan Maya

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Mopan (Mayan, Belize/Guatemala) has two noun classifiers that resemble gender markers in that they indicate sex of the referent when used with nouns denoting humans, and are also used with terms for animals and inanimate objects. However, the Mopan gender markers (GM) violate expectations about canonical gender and agreement in the following ways:

- Only a minority of nouns co-occur with a GM; others co-occur either with an article or, if inalienably possessed, with a possessive marker. This violates the expectation that every noun should be able to trigger agreement.
- Counter to the expectation that gender agreement should occur in multiple syntactic domains, gender is marked only on the NP, and unlike some Mayan languages (e.g. Grinevald 2002), the Mopan GM are never used as pronominal reference tracking devices independently of a noun.
- Counter to the expectation that agreement should be obligatory and morphologically bound, the GM can be separated from the noun by an intervening adjective and can sometimes be omitted.

We propose that these non-canonical properties can be illuminated by examining the productive functions of these forms in Mopan. The GM serve as determiners, although they pattern differently from both the article and the possessive markers. Like the other Mopan determiners, the GM function productively to distinguish predicates from non-predicates in a language in which the lexicon is polyvalent (Lois & Vapnarsky 2006), i.e. many lexical roots can function either as argument or predicate. Mopan GM are also productively used to form agentives from active intransitive verbs, allowing specification of natural gender, not normally specified in the third person in Mopan. The GM may also precede adjectival modifiers of normally non-gendered nouns, a differentiating function also linked to gender. The “non-canonical” appearance of Mopan gender markers is thus related to specific typological features of this language.

### References

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