all their texts are strung, even those written down in Spanish letters during Colonial times.

Here are a few examples of some Yucatec sentences, to give an idea of how these principles are put into verbal action. To begin with, here is a sentence using a transitive verb:

t u hatz'-ah-o'on-o'ob, "they hit us" (in the past)
t, completive aspect, transitive verb
u-...-o'ob, "they" (Set A)
hatz', "to hit"
-ah, perfective suffix
o'on, "us" (Set B)

And another:

taan in-hatz'-ik-ech, "I am hitting you"
taan, durative aspect
in-, *"I"* (Set A)
hatz', "to hit"
-ik, imperfective verb suffix
-ech, "you" (object, Set B pronoun)

And finally, a sentence with an intransitive verb:

h ween-en, "I slept"
h, completive aspect, intransitive verb
ween, "to sleep"
-en, "I" (Set B)

Remember the possessive?

in hu'un, "my book"
in, "my" (Set A)
hu'un, "book"

Not only does time play a critical role in Maya verb constructions, but there is a whole class of intransitives which describe an object's or person's position and shape in space; there are distinct terms, for instance, for "lying face down" and "lying face up." These "positionals," as they are called, have their own inflectional suffixes.

As English-speakers, we take it for granted that one can speak of, say "four birds" or "twenty-five books," but this kind of numerical construction is impossible in the Mayan languages – between the number and the thing counted there has to be a *numerical classifier*, describing the class to which the object, animal, plant, or thing belongs. We have a glimmering of this sort

of construction when we talk of "two flocks of geese" or "a pride of lions," but this is pale stuff compared to the richness of Mayan classifiers. Colonial Yucatec dictionaries list dozens of these, but only a handful are still in use in today's Yucatán, yet even these have to be interposed even when the number itself might be in Spanish.[6] If I see three horses in a pasture, I would count them as *ox-tul tzimin* (*ox*, "three"; *-tul*, classifier for animate things; *tzimin*, "horse" or "tapir"). However, if there were three stones lying in the same pasture, I would have to say *ox-p'el tunich* (*ox*, "three"; *-p'el*, classifier for inanimate things; *tunich*, "stone").

Until the past century, when so much of the ancient system was lost, the Maya counted *vigesimally* – by base twenty – instead of *decimally* – by base ten – as we do (although we retain a trace of this in such archaic expressions as "three score and ten" for "seventy"). But, after all, physiologically we have twenty digits, not just ten, so the human dimension is very much present in the Mayan system. By means of it, they could count very large numbers – into the millions, if need be.

Compared with the languages of the Indo-European family, Mayan is fairly gender-blind: there really are no masculine, feminine, or neuter constructions in most of the grammar. One and the same pronoun is used for "he," "she," and "it." Nonetheless, male and female personal names and occupational titles are often prefixed by special particles indicating sex. In Yucatec, these are *aj* for men, and *ix* for women. Thus, we have in our early Colonial sources *aj tz'ib*, "scribe" (= "he of the writing"), and *Ix Cheel*, the mother goddess (= "Lady Rainbow").

It is not just enough for a language to have a grammar, it must have a syntax, too, so that words may be strung into sentences. Every language in the world has its own characteristic word order. For the ancient Egyptians, the order of a sentence with a transitive verb would have been verb-subject-object, or VSO, so that to express a sentence which in English would be "The scribe knows the counsel," a denizen of the Nile would have had to say "knows the scribe the counsel." We would use the SVO construction for this. But the Mayan languages generally use the order verb-object-subject or VOS ("knows the counsel the scribe"); moreover, with intransitive verbs which take no object, such as "the lord is seated," the verb still precedes the subject.

Given the fact that there are grammars and dictionaries for all the thirty-odd Mayan languages (and for Yucatec, a half-dozen major dictionaries from all time periods since the Conquest), one would have expected early would-be decipherers of Maya hieroglyphic writing to make some effort, as Champollion did with Coptic/Egyptian, to immerse themselves in one or more of the Mayan tongues. I would like to say that this was so, but it's not what happened. Incredible as it may seem, up until about four decades ago the Maya script was the only decipherment for which a thorough grounding