

# The effect of topography on language and cognition in Isthmus Zapotec

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 Geographic Grounding: Place, direction and landscape in the grammars of the world  
 Copenhagen, Denmark

## Synopsis

- Introduction
- MesoSpace
- Topography in MesoSpace
- Space and topography in Diidxa za
- Cultural mediation: ethnophysiology
- Conclusions

## Introduction

- does topography influence language & cognition?
- test case: spatial frames of reference
- previous qualitative work: Wassman & Dasen 1998; Polian & Bohnemeyer 2011; Palmer 2015

**Figure 1.** Three neighboring villages on the North-East peninsula of Bali using the same set of geocentric terms each based on different local conventions (Bohnemeyer et al. ms, based on a detail from Wassman & Dasen 1998: 698)

## Introduction (cont.)

- does topography influence cognition?(cont.)
- preliminary quantitative evidence: MesoSpace
- (Bohnemeyer et al 2014, 2015, ms.)
- second part of the talk: the role of culture
- inter-community variation in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

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## MesoSpace

- NSF award #BCS-0723694 "Spatial language and cognition in Mesoamerica"
- 15 field workers
- 13 MA languages
- Mayan
  - Chol (J.-J. Vázquez)
  - Q'anjob'al (E. Mateo Toledo)
  - Tzeltal (G. Polian)
  - Yucatec (J. Bohnemeyer)
- Mixe-Zoquean
  - Ayula Mixe (R. Romero Méndez)
  - Soteapanec (S. Gutierrez Morales)
  - Teapañán Zoque (R. Zavala Maldonado)
- Oto-Manguean
  - Otomí (E. Palancar; N. H. Green; S. Hernández-Gómez)
  - Juchitán Zapotec (G. Pérez Bóez)
- Tarascan
  - Purepecha (A. Capistrán)
- Totonacan
  - Huehuetla Tepehua (S. Smythe Kung)
- Uto-Aztecan
  - Corá (V. Vázquez)
  - Pajapan Nawat (V. Peraita)

**Figure 2.** MesoSpace field sites

MesoSpace (cont.)

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- 3 non-MA "controls"
  - Seri (C. O' Meara)
  - Mayangna (E. Benedicto, A. Eggleston in collaboration with the Mayangna Yulbarangyang Baina)
  - Mexican Spanish (R. Romero Méndez)
- 2 (interrelated) domains
  - frames of reference (labels for entity parts)

Figure 4. Meronyms in Ayoquesca Zapotec (left) and Tenejapa Tzeltal (adapted from MacLauray 1989 and Levinson 1994)

MesoSpace (cont.)

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- MesoSpace 1b
  - Spatial language and cognition beyond Mesoamerica
    - NSF award #BCS 1053123, 2011 – 2016
  - new languages
    - Jahai (Mon-Khmer; N. Burenhult)
    - Japanese (isolate; J. Olsad)
    - Mandarin (Sino-Tibetan; H. Hsiao)
    - Taiwanese (Sino-Tibetan; H. Hsiao)
    - Vietnamese (Mon-Khmer; J. Lovegren)
    - Wan (Mande; T. Nikitina)
    - Yurakaré (isolate, Bolivia; R. van Gijn and V. Hirtzel)
  - continuing languages
    - additional data collected from speakers of
      - Isthmus Zapotec; Tzeltal, and Yucatec Maya; Mayangna and Spanish
  - objectives
    - collect further data on linguistic vs. environmental determinants of reference frame use

MesoSpace (cont.)

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- frames of reference: alternative classifications and subtypes

Figure 5. Reference frame types and their classification (A - 'away from', B - 'back', D - 'downriver', F - 'front', L - 'left', R - 'right', T - 'toward', U - 'upriver'; Bohmeyer & Levinson ms.)

MesoSpace (cont.)

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- Tasks used by MesoSpace to study reference frames
  - Ball & Chair (photo stimuli, referential communication task)
  - Talking Animals (3-D toy animal stimuli, referential communication task)
  - New Animals (3-D toy animal stimuli, recall and recreate array of animals)

Figure 6. Design of the Map-and-Tree task (Levinson et al. 1996: 307)

Figure 7. One of four Talking Animals trials

Figure 8. Two of the Ball & Chair photos, featuring an intrinsic contrast

Figure 9. Animals-in-a-Row: design (Levinson 2003)

MesoSpace (cont.)

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- Evaluating possible contributing factors - independent variables in mixed effect regression models (GLMMs)
  - Participants' age, education, L2 use, reading and writing frequency
    - Self-reported via demographic survey
  - Population Geography
    - Population density based on Google Earth area of municipality and population from census (INEGI 2010)
  - Local Topography
    - In Mexico: Classification of geomorphological regions (Hernández Santana et al. 2007)
    - World-wide: Improved Hammond Classification of landforms (ESRI 2011; ArcGIS software)

MesoSpace (cont.)

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13 Topography in MesoSpace

- Two classifications have been used to represent local topography in multivariate statistical analyses
  - Geomorphological regions (New Atlas of Mexico, Hernández Santana et al., 2007)
    - Bohnermeyer et al. 2014, 2015, ms.
  - Improved Hammond classification of landforms (ESRI 2011, ArcGIS)
    - Moore et al. ms.

14 Topography in MesoSpace (cont.)

orogenic belts  
volcanic belts  
central high plateaus  
continental shelf  
coastal basins and littoral transgressions

Geomorphological regions (New Atlas of Mexico, Hernández Santana et al. 2007)

Figure 10. (left) Mapa NA III\_1. From Hernández Santana et al. (2007)  
Figure 11. (above) Modified 5-way classification used in previous MesoSpace classifications

15 Topography in MesoSpace (cont.)

Hammond Landform Classification with Plain Areas

High mountains  
Low mountains  
Tablelands  
Hills  
Flat plains

Slope Classes: % of neighborhood over 8% slope

Figure 12. World Landforms - Improved Hammond Method (ESRI 2011) (<http://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=c817a746aa437cbd72a6d39cab4559>)

16 findings I: Ball & Chair

MesoSpace (cont.)

Figure 13. Two of the Ball & Chair photos, featuring an intrinsic contrast

Table 1. Geomorphological classification of field sites in the B&C study (N = 53 x 2 participants)

Language	Locality	Geomorphological Classification
Tzeltal	Chocoma, Chiapas	orogenic belt
Yucatec	Yaxley, Quintana Roo	continental shelf
Yucatec	Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Quintana Roo	continental shelf
Mixc	San Pablo y San Pablo Ayutla, Oaxaca	orogenic belt
Otomí	San Rafael Tepehuac, Querétaro	volcanic belt
Juchiteco	La Ventosa, Oaxaca	coastal basin
Purépecha	Santa Fe de la Laguna, Michoacán	volcanic belt
Seni	El Desemboque (de las cerros), Sonora	coastal basin
Sumu	Rosita, Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte	coastal basin
Spanish (Mexico)	San Miguel Baldem, Mexico State	volcanic belt
Spanish (Mexico)	Chimalcatlan, Tlaxigtemango, Morelos	orogenic belt
Spanish (Chongqing)	Rosita, Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte	coastal basin
Spanish (Barcelona)	Barcelona, Spain	coastal basin

Table 2. Summary of the four regression models of the B&C responses using reading frequency to estimate literacy. Models that include L1-Spanish speakers exclude L2 use as a predictor variable. (Significance codes: 0 '\*\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*\*' 0.01 '\*\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1)

Sample	L1-Spanish speakers included	Models			
		1	2	3	4
Dependent variable	Reading	Yes	Yes	No	No
	Frequency	Yes	No	Yes	No
Effects	LANGUAGE GROUP	***	***	***	***
	POPULATION DENSITY				***
	LITERACY				***
	POPULATION DENSITY				***

Bottom line

- More relative frame use in coastal basins
- More geocentric frame use in volcanic belts
- Population density positively correlated w/ egocentrism, negatively w/ geocentrism

17 findings II: Talking Animals

MesoSpace (cont.)

Figure 14. One of four Talking Animals trials

Figure 15. Design of the Talking Animals task (adapted from Pederson et al. 1998: 562)

Table 3. Field sites of the TA study by pop. density and geomorphology (N = 343 x 2)

Language	Locality	Country	Density	Topographic Log Scale Classification
Japanese	Sekigaya	Japan (Mainland)	15551	4.19 flat
Taiwanese Southern Min	Taipei	Taiwan	9949	4.00 flat
Mandarin Chinese	Taipei	Taiwan	9949	4.00 flat
Japanese	Nishio	Japan (Okinawa)	8244	3.92 hills
English	Buffalo	United States	2549	3.41 flat
Japanese	Yornitan	Japan (Okinawa)	1200	3.08 hills
Taiwanese Southern Min	Tainan	Taiwan	855	2.93 flat
Walthamense	Long Jue	Vietnam	499	2.41 flat
Japanese	Fuinomiya	Japan (Mainland)	339	2.53 low mountains
	Aizuwakamatsu	Japan (Mainland)	321	2.51 low mountains
	Nago	Japan (Okinawa)	293	2.47 low mountains
	Miyakojima	Japan (Okinawa)	248	2.45 hills
	Yonaguni	Japan (Okinawa)	58	1.76 hills
	Shiho	Japan (Mainland)	49	1.69 low mountains
Isthmus Zapotec	La Ventosa	Mexico	5	0.70 flat
Yucatec	Luchón de Tarazaga	Mexico	3	0.70 flat
	Yaxley	Mexico	2	0.30 flat
	Felipe Carrillo Puerto	Mexico	2	0.30 flat

18 findings II: Talking Animals (cont.)

MesoSpace (cont.)

Figure 14. One of four Talking Animals trials

Figure 15. Design of the Talking Animals task (adapted from Pederson et al. 1998: 562)

Table 4. Regression models of the Talking Animals data: summary of effects (Signif. codes: 0 '\*\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*\*' 0.01 '\*\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1)

Dependent variable	Literacy variable		Independent variables (fixed effects)			
	Writing	Reading	L1	L2 use	Literacy	Topography pop. density
Geocentric	Yes	No	***		**	***
	No	Yes	**	*	***	***
Relative	Yes	No	***		***	***
	No	Yes	**		**	**

MesoSpace (cont.)

19 findings III: New Animals

Figure 16. Animals-in-a-Row: design (Levinson 2003)

Table 5. Participants whose responses were included in the analysis, by language, age, and sex

	American English	Japanese	Mandarin Chinese	Mixe	Otomi	Spanish	Sumu Mayangna	Taiwanese Southern Min	Tarascan	Tzeltal	Vietnamese	Yucatec	Isthmus Zapotec	Total
Gender														
Male	12	33	2	3	1	11	4	2	8	9	4	7	7	103
Female	8	15	7	9	4	21	6	19	6	5	16	10	11	137
Age														
>30	2	17	0	8	5	18	6	19	8	6	8	11	11	119
<30	19	31	9	4	0	14	4	2	6	8	12	6	7	122
Total	21	48	9	12	5	32	10	21	14	14	20	17	18	241

MesoSpace (cont.)

20 findings III: New Animals (cont.)

New Animals Responses - Facing Direction

Figure 17. Response type frequency by L1

MesoSpace (cont.)

21 findings III: New Animals (cont.)

Dependent variable	Literacy variable			Independent variables (fixed effects)		
	Writing	Reading	L1	Literacy	Topography	Pop. density
Egocentric	Yes	No	***		**	***
	No	Yes	***	*		***

Table 6. Regression models of the New Animals data: summary of effects (Signif. codes: 0 '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1)

**Bottom line**

- Field sites featuring hilly topography show sig. less egocentric use than flat regions
- Population density positively correlated w/ egocentrism

MesoSpace (cont.)

22 discussion

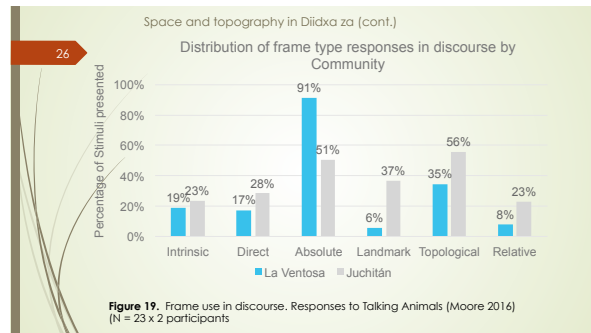
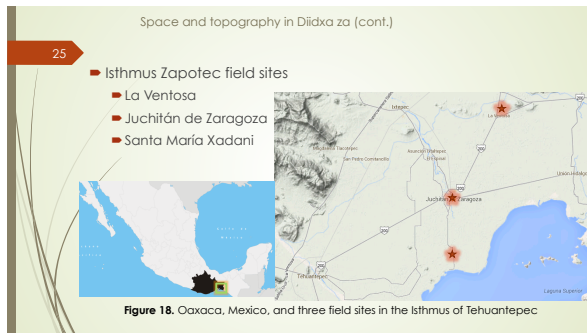
- both population density and topography confirmed
  - as independent factors influencing reference frame use in both discourse and recall memory
- by hypothesis, the effect of population density is primarily mediated by infrastructure
  - egocentrism more efficient for navigating urban roadways
- the effect of topography has been hypothesized to be mediated by the availability of salient potential 'anchors'
  - such as physiogeographic gradients and natural landmarks
  - cf. Polian & Bohnermeyer 2011; Li & Gleitman 2002
- questions
  - what is the role of culture in these geographic effects?
  - at what level of granularity do such effects begin to matter?

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24 Space and topography in Diidxa za

- Diidxa za (Isthmus Zapotec)
  - Otomanguan, VSO, tonal, ~100,000 speakers (INEGI 2010 census)
- Reference frame use in Isthmus Zapotec
  - Pérez Báez (2011) reference frame use in recall and discourse
    - 2-D stimuli in La Ventosa
    - Strong geocentric preference, based on prevailing winds
  - Moore (2016) frame use in recall and discourse
    - 3-D stimuli in La Ventosa and Juchitán
    - Confirmed geocentric preference
    - Significant variation exists between communities
    - Variation also exists in degree of preference for geocentric over egocentric encoding in memory



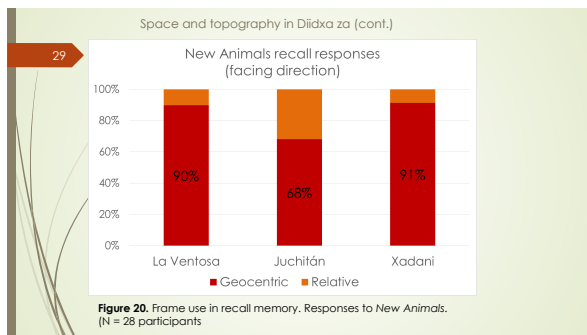
Space and topography in Diidxa za (cont.)

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Dependent variable	Literacy variable		Independent variables (fixed effects)			
	Writing	Reading	Community	L2 Use	Education	Literacy
Geocentric	Yes	No	***			
	No	Yes	***			
Relative	Yes	No	**			
	No	Yes	**			
Absolute	Yes	No	***			
	No	Yes	***			
Direct	Yes	No	**			
	No	Yes	**			*
'Landmark based'	No	Yes	***			

**Table 8.** Regression models of the Talking Animals Zapotec data: summary of effects (Signif. codes: 0 '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1)

(model details in Appendices)



Space and topography in Diidxa za (cont.)

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- Large-scale topographic classifications don't capture the variation in local landscape throughout the Isthmus
  - All three are coastal (Hernandez et al) or flat (ESRI)
- Yet, variation in frame use in discourse and memory exists between communities



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Cultural mediation: ethnophysiography

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- the impact of the environment on cognition is mediated by culture
  - community-specific practices evolve around salient environmental gradients
  - inter-community variation such as witnessed in the Isthmus is the result of this
    - another example: Bali (Wassman & Dasen 1998: 698)

**Figure 21.** Three neighboring villages on the North-East peninsula of Bali using the same set of geocentric terms each based on different local conventions (Bohnermeyer et al. ms. based on a detail from Wassman & Dasen 1998: 698)

Cultural mediation: ethnophysiography (cont.)

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- studying the cultural mediation of environmental forces: ethnophysiography
  - cf. Bohnermeyer 2002; Burenhult & Levinson 2008; Johnson & Hunn 2010; Mark & Turk 2003; Mark et al 1999; O'Meara 2010; Smith & Mark 2003; *in fer alia*

Cultural mediation: ethnophysiography (cont.)

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- one salient environmental feature that's not directly captured in a topographic classification: prevailing winds
  - the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has year-round prevailing north winds
    - these are indirectly shaped by the relief, in that a gap in the North American cordillera creates a giant wind tunnel

**Figure 22.** Diagram of Tehuantepec winds (<https://sango-mp.com/gawker-media/image/upload/v1vrtme469ebgy6l1mbb.PNG>)

Cultural mediation: ethnophysiography (cont.)

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- these winds provide the Isthmus with a salient geocentric cue that is readily accessible outdoors
- although this cue is available throughout the region, it appears to play a more prominent cultural role in La Ventosa
  - as reflected in the name ('the windy one') and the ubiquity of wind farms, which are a source of great public controversy

**Figure 23.** La Ventosa windfarms, taken from the Sierra Sur foothills

Cultural mediation: ethnophysiography (cont.)

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- evidence from ethnophysiographic elicitation confirms this
  - data sources
    - Lexical inventory/salience of features
      - Considerable variation exists between communities (Listing task: 10 speakers, 3 communities, avg. 12 terms/person)
    - Landmarks in direction-giving
      - Route description task: 5 pairs per community
    - Landmarks/environmental features used in descriptions of small-scale space (Talking Animals)
      - is there significant variation between communities in
        - (i) extent of Geocentric use
        - (ii) type of Geo use (local/manmade landmark, environmental landmark, absolute/cardinal system)??
      - If so, this variable in a statistical model could independently predict frame use (in discourse & recall)
        - vs. community membership, or other factors

Cultural mediation: ethnophysiography (cont.)

37 Findings

- Most frequent responses to a landscape term listing task (items that occurred 5+ times)
- Prompt words were: dani, guigu, guixhi

La Ventosa	Juchitán de Zaragoza	Santa María Xadani
Yaga 'tree' (13)	Yaga 'tree' (12)	Nisa do' 'sea' (10)
Dani 'hill' (13)	Guigu 'river' (9)	Dani 'hill' (9)
Bi 'wind' (12)	Dani 'hill' (9)	Guixhi 'forest/jungle' (7)
Mani 'animal' (9)	Mani 'animal' (8)	Ranya 'milpa' (6)
Nisa 'water' (7)	Yuu 'house' (5)	Guigu 'river' (6)
Guigu 'river' (7)	Nisa 'water' (5)	Bize* 'well' (6)
Nisa do' 'sea' (5)	Guixi 'trash' (5)	Esteru 'marsh/swamp' (5)
Guie 'rock/soil' (5)		

Table 9. Listing task responses by community

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39 Conclusions

- confirmed: geography influences spatial language & cognition
  - MesoSpace has found evidence of effects of population density and topography
    - as independent factors influencing reference frame use in both discourse and recall memory
  - by hypothesis, these effects are primarily mediated by infrastructure and the local availability of potential salient anchors

40 Conclusions (cont.)

- the challenge of topographic classification
  - there is as yet no universally agreed upon system of variables
    - that jointly capture the morphology of the Earth's crust everywhere
  - MesoSpace has successfully pioneered the application of the Improved Hammond Classification
    - for the search of cognitive effects of geography

41 Conclusions (cont.)

- studying cultural mediation between environment and cognition/behavior: ethnophysiography
  - community-specific practices evolve around salient environmental gradients

42 Thank you!  
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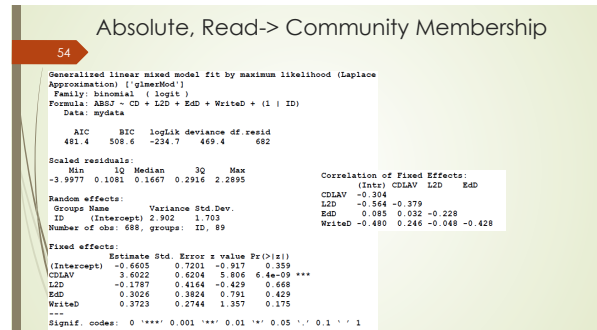
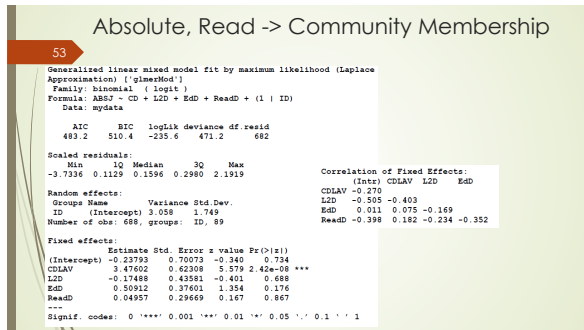
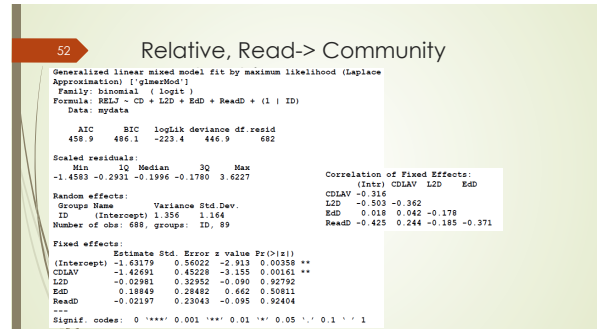
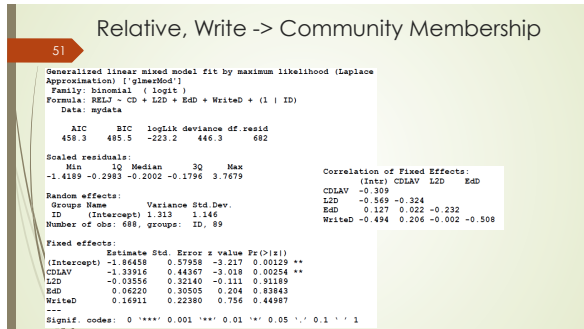
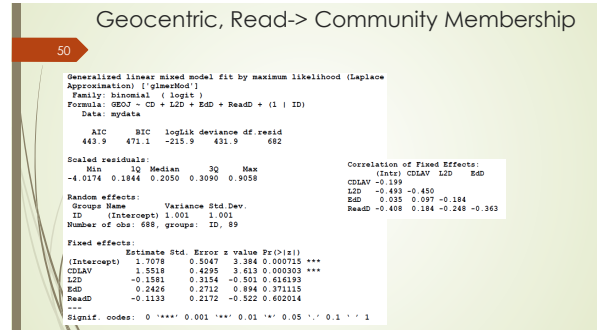
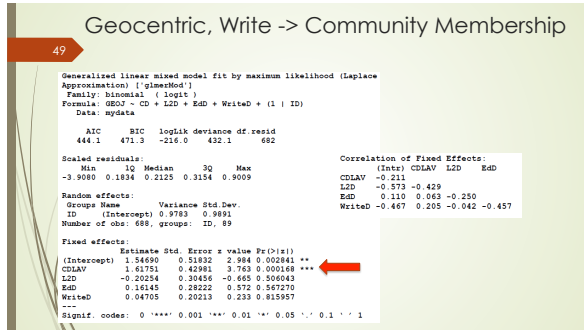
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48 Appendices:  
Model print outs for Zapotec Talking Animals





55 Direct, Write -> Community Membership

```

Generalized linear mixed model fit by maximum likelihood (Laplace
Approximation) [glmerMod]
Family: binomial ( logit )
Formula: DIR2 ~ CD + LZD + EdD + WriteD + (1 | ID)
Data: mydata

AIC      BIC    logLik deviance df.resid
685.1    712.3   -336.5    673.1    682

Scaled residuals:
  Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-0.7898 -0.5081 -0.3854 -0.3161  2.6862

Correlation of Fixed Effects:
          (Inter) CDLAV  LZD    EdD
CDLAV    -0.277
LZD      -0.595  0.386
EdD      0.110  0.049 -0.231
WriteD   -0.476  0.157  0.003 -0.471

Random effects:
 Group Name      Variance Std.Dev.
ID (Intercept)  0.3159   0.562
Number of obs: 688, groups: ID, 89

Fixed effects:
              Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -1.5203      0.3634  -4.184 2.86e-05 ***
CDLAV        -0.7802      0.2752  -2.794  0.0052 **
LZD          0.3203      0.2046  1.566  0.1174
EdD         -0.2393      0.1820  -1.315  0.1887
WriteD       0.1923      0.1323  1.453  0.1461
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
    
```

56 Direct, Read-> Community Membership, Reading

```

Generalized linear mixed model fit by maximum likelihood (Laplace
Approximation) [glmerMod]
Family: binomial ( logit )
Formula: DIR2 ~ CD + LZD + EdD + ReadD + (1 | ID)
Data: mydata

AIC      BIC    logLik deviance df.resid
683.0    710.2   -335.5    671.0    682

Scaled residuals:
  Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-0.8442 -0.5047 -0.2930 -0.3201  2.7717

Correlation of Fixed Effects:
          (Inter) CDLAV  LZD    EdD
CDLAV    -0.288
LZD      -0.524 -0.404
EdD      0.028  0.065 -0.160
ReadD   -0.396  0.167 -0.205 -0.381

Random effects:
 Group Name      Variance Std.Dev.
ID (Intercept)  0.3119   0.5585
Number of obs: 688, groups: ID, 89

Fixed effects:
              Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -1.5412      0.3464  -4.449 8.64e-06 ***
CDLAV        -0.7364      0.2784  -2.645  0.00816 **
LZD          0.2316      0.2078  1.115  0.26498
EdD         -0.2491      0.1758  -1.435  0.15143
ReadD       0.2804      0.1380  2.032  0.04210 *
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
    
```

57 Landmark, Read -> Community Membership

```

Generalized linear mixed model fit by maximum likelihood (Laplace
Approximation) [glmerMod]
Family: binomial ( logit )
Formula: LANEJ ~ CD + LZD + EdD + ReadD + (1 | ID)
Data: mydata

AIC      BIC    logLik deviance df.resid
388.9    416.1   -189.5    376.9    682

Scaled residuals:
  Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-1.6398 -0.1700 -0.0926 -0.0536  4.2369

Correlation of Fixed Effects:
          (Inter) CDLAV  LZD    EdD
CDLAV    -0.164
LZD      -0.521 -0.490
EdD      0.023  0.113 -0.196
ReadD   -0.379  0.279 -0.216 -0.329

Random effects:
 Group Name      Variance Std.Dev.
ID (Intercept)  4.899    2.213
Number of obs: 688, groups: ID, 89

Fixed effects:
              Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept) -0.4116      0.8938  -0.461  0.642
CDLAV        -4.0363      0.8656  -4.663 3.12e-06 ***
LZD          0.3748      0.5607  0.668  0.502
EdD         -0.7611      0.5287  -1.440  0.150
ReadD       -0.5531      0.3895  -1.420  0.156
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
    
```