

Introduction: How Did They Talk to One Another? Language Use and Communication in Multilingual New Spain

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Abstract. This introduction poses the central question of this special issue: how did New Spain's colonial institutions and ethnically diverse colonial subjects use Nahuatl to administer and navigate a multilingual society? In response, I lay out a framework drawn from the articles and my own research that emphasizes the following themes: the importance of place and regional context in studies of language use; cleavages and connections between writing and speaking; language acquisition at the interface of the institutional and quotidian in colonial society; and language use as a means of shaping and negotiating interethnic relations and social status. I close the introduction by suggesting new avenues for research, including language use in everyday life, the development of regional forms of languages, and the making of language ideologies locally and colony-wide.

Multilingualism posed a conundrum to New Spain's rulers, administrators, and evangelizers from colonialism's inception to its conclusion and beyond. It also presents a fascinating and vexing puzzle for historians interested in the intersections of language, culture, and society. The essays in this special issue focus on one particular piece of this puzzle: the use of Nahuatl as a lingua franca, vehicular language, and language of quotidian interactions in multilingual regions throughout colonial Mesoamerica.¹ By way of introduction, I offer the following framework with which to consider some major issues raised by the essays: the importance of place and regional context in studies of language use; cleavages and connections between writing and speaking; and how the study of language acquisition affords glimpses of the interface between the institutional and quotidian in colonial lives.

A variety of locales figure in these essays, some at the urban heart of New Spain and others at the fringes of the viceroyalty. In Robert C. Schwal-

ler's piece, "The Importance of Mestizos and Mulatos as Bilingual Intermediaries in Sixteenth-Century New Spain," mestizos and mulatos spoke Nahuatl in quotidian settings in order to configure spaces of intercultural mediation in the isthmus of Tehuantepec (a crossroads for trade, commerce, and travel), mining towns such as Guanajuato and Taxco (magnets of migration), and the cattle ranches of northern Mexico (heterogeneous, itinerant societies). Not surprisingly, Mexico City and its environs also figure prominently in R. Schwaller's study as well as in Mark Z. Christensen's essay, "The Use of Nahuatl in Evangelization and the New World Ministry of Sebastian," which analyzes Nahuatl-language Christian texts written for purposes of evangelization. Martin Nesvig's essay, "Spanish Men, Indigenous Language, and Informal Interpreters in Postcontact Mexico," is set in a multiethnic and overwhelmingly indigenous imperial periphery in the former Tarascan empire in the diocese of Michoacan, where Nahuatl served as a language for trade and colonial administration. Missionary priests, the protagonists of John F. Schwaller's essay, "The Expansion of Nahuatl as a Lingua Franca among Priests in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," were trained in Nahuatl in order to evangelize indigenous groups in far-flung regions of New Spain where Nahuatl was not the autochthonous language but had been introduced as a language of trade and empire by central Mexicans. Central Mexicans (Mexicanos) are also protagonists in Laura E. Matthew and Sergio F. Romero's essay "Nahuatl and Pipil in Colonial Guatemala: A Central American Counterpoint," but this time in their role as military allies to Spanish conquerors. Guatemala's multiethnic Indian conquistadors, many of whom hailed from Central Mexico but some from Oaxaca and other regions, used Nahuatl to communicate among themselves and with the locals they encountered in their postconquest role as colonial administrators, making Nahuatl and Castilian the "cooperative languages of conquest." Of particular note in the Matthew and Romero piece is their emphasis on the circulation and mutual influences of different written forms of Nahuatl: the classical form from Central Mexico; Pipil, a variety spoken on the Pacific coast of Central America; and what the authors call "Central American Colonial Nahuatl," an imitative form of Classical Nahuatl that exhibited features of the other two.

Each place to which these essays take us represents a setting for the engendering of Nahuatl as a common language among indigenous groups and among indigenous and nonindigenous people. The administrative, social, and economic roles played by the Nahuatl-speaking intermediaries in these settings often implied high geographical mobility, commerce, and the need for interethnic communication. Thus these essays approach the social history of language in colonial Mesoamerica by focusing squarely on

the contexts of multilingualism and cross-cultural communication, thereby expanding upon a dominant analytical paradigm: the New Philology.²

The New Philology approaches the history of Nahua society through philological study of “mundane” documents produced by Nahuas in Nahuatl, such as municipal council records and wills.³ This scholarship has yielded a wealth of information about how Nahuas used written Nahuatl to pursue indigenous ends in a colonial world. By using Nahuatl as both object and tool of historical analysis, philological studies have taught us much about the culturally specific categories and concepts that structured social relationships, political authority, and land tenure among colonial Nahuas and about how those categories and the Nahuatl language itself changed over time.

In a different vein, outside the New Philology, scholars of Christian evangelization in colonial Mexico—most notably, Louise Burkhart—have analyzed Nahuatl-language documents written in ecclesiastical settings, including catechisms and didactic theater, as a means of understanding cross-cultural views of the sacred and indigenous resistance to conversion in the register of a “soft voice.”⁴ Christensen’s essay represents the kinds of insights afforded by such an approach.

For the most part, written Nahuatl was produced by an elite stratum of Nahua society: alphabetically literate *caciques* and *principales* (high- and middle-ranking indigenous notables) and municipal scribes and officers. Spanish priests and their native assistants also authored Nahuatl texts for the purposes of conversion. As the essays in this special issue reveal, however, Nahuatl use in colonial Mesoamerica was not limited to the written word, the pens of literate Nahua scribes and *fiscales* (priests’ assistants), or Nahua-dominated central Mexico. Figures who were liminal to Nahua society and not necessarily elite or literate used spoken Nahuatl to bridge difference or communicate in day-to-day interactions. Casta cowhands in northern Mexico, renegade Spaniards living in the indigenous world of Michoacan, Spanish missionary priests throughout New Spain, and Indian conquistadors in Guatemala spoke Nahuatl in an empire where Spanish was supposed to be the official language, and in some cases, in regions where Nahuatl was not an autochthonous tongue. Nahuatl-language documents provide important evidence in Christensen’s and Matthew and Romero’s case studies. Spanish-language documents—notably the Inquisition cases used by Nesvig and R. Schwaller and church and administrative documentation used by Matthew and Romero—provide crucial evidence of a different kind: references to the everyday contexts of communication in Nahuatl without a written trace or transcription of the language itself.

In my own research, I have found criminal cases to be especially fer-

tile sources regarding the quotidian contexts of Nahuatl use in multilingual regions of Oaxaca, like the district of Villa Alta in the Sierra Norte where Mixe, Chinantec, and three variants of Zapotec were spoken. As was true for the case of Guatemala, Nahuatl was used as a language of colonial administration in Villa Alta. The participation of Nahuatl-speaking Central Mexican Indian conquistadors in the Spanish conquest of the Sierra Norte and their roles as colonists and administrators in the centuries that followed suggest how Nahuatl became a language of Spanish colonial administration in the region.⁵

Dominican friars constituted another group of Nahuatl-speaking colonizers in the Sierra Norte who used Nahuatl for purposes of evangelization in response to the challenges posed by the region's many indigenous languages.⁶ Zapotec and Mixe elites learned from the friars how to write in Nahuatl. In the Zapotec areas of Oaxaca, the friars and their native assistants alphabetized Zapotec, which replaced Nahuatl as a written standard by the late sixteenth century. By contrast, the friars complained that Mixe was difficult to write due to its grammar, so they did not produce pastoral literature in Mixe until the mid-eighteenth century, and the Mixe never wrote in their own language during the colonial period. Instead, the Mixe wrote in Nahuatl, and they used spoken and written Nahuatl as a language of interface with the Spanish colonial administration well into the eighteenth century, approximately a century and a half after Nahuatl had given way to Spanish as the language of colonialism in the Zapotec regions.⁷

Nahuatl also served as a vehicular language in quotidian settings in the Sierra Norte, in particular as a language of trade. Different contexts of Nahuatl use, vehicular and administrative, could intersect in interesting ways. In a 1698 case of murder along the Camino Real—the region's primary artery of trade—Spanish officials commissioned a *pardo* (a person of mixed African descent) who spoke and understood Zapotec, Nahuatl, and Spanish to serve as an interpreter during an interrogatory of witnesses. Among the witnesses were Zapotecs and Mixes, who had been traveling together at the time of the murder. Since the interpreter understood Zapotec, the scribe recorded the testimony of the Zapotec witnesses. Among the Mixe witnesses, one spoke Nahuatl, so his testimony was recorded; but another did not, so his voice remained unheard.⁸

This case is suggestive on a number of levels. The first concerns quotidian communication. In the multilingual group of travelers who later served as witnesses, Nahuatl appears to have been the means by which they communicated with one another. Furthermore, that a nonindigenous person who was not a colonial official—a *pardo*—spoke Nahuatl demonstrates the language's everyday utility for people of various ethnic and racial

origins for whom we might assume Spanish served as a primary means of communication. Finally, the exclusion from the legal record of the Mixe witness who could not speak Nahuatl tells us something about the relationship between language and power. Since Zapotec was far more widely spoken and understood by Spanish officials and nonnatives in the district, Zapotec speakers could access the courts with greater ease. Mixe speakers either needed to speak Nahuatl or engage a Nahuatl-speaking intermediary to access the legal system, suggesting a discrepancy in power between Mixes and Zapotecs. The Zapotecs and Mixes had in fact experienced a long rivalry that predated the Spanish colonial period. The privileging by Spanish colonial officials and Dominican friars of the Zapotec language over the Mixe language had powerful implications for ethnic hierarchies as Mixe and Zapotec communities struggled over land, resources, and other forms of social, political, and economic currency in colonial society. In short, colonial language politics favored the Zapotecs in this interethnic struggle.⁹ That Mixe speakers had to resort to Nahuatl to access the courts also suggests a powerful broker role for Nahuatl speakers in the district.

As the 1698 case from Villa Alta suggests, criminal cases can yield rich data about socially situated language use in a multilingual world: who used what languages, where, when, in what context, for what purpose, to what ends, and to what effect. Yet the challenges posed by researching colonial Nahuatl in spoken contexts and in multilingual settings are many. First and foremost, there is no single, identifiable archive that scholars can consult. Instead, fragmentary evidence appears in passing, often in the course of witness testimony in a criminal or Inquisition case whose subject matter does not suggest that it might harbor references to Nahuatl-language use. This implies a slow-going and piecemeal acquisition of data, much of which one acquires while researching something else. Second, there is no written record of the Nahuatl that was spoken or spoken about, which frustrates efforts to identify regional variation, processes of conventionalization, or degrees of linguistic proficiency.

Despite these shortcomings, piecemeal data can be richly illuminating. R. Schwaller argues that testimony that indicates the use of spoken Nahuatl in multiethnic settings provides evidence of social networks that crossed boundaries of ethnicity and caste, revealing the interstitial social position of mestizos and mulatos who mediated between indigenous communities and other kinds of social groups and spaces, such as cattle ranches or interethnic ritual. Nesvig contends that identification of Nahuatl-speaking Spaniards and their social networks in Michoacan provides evidence of a kind of reverse “acculturation” and cultural adaptation. Matthew and Romero make use of references to Nahuatl use in Spanish-language documents in combi-

nation with data from Nahuatl-language documents to re-create the social contexts for the circulation of different forms of Nahuatl in colonial Guatemala. In short, piecemeal references to Nahuatl use in Spanish-language documents tell us simultaneously about the social relations that facilitated interethnic linguistic interactions and the figures whose language competence made cross-cultural interactions possible due to factors such as their family connections, residence and migratory patterns, and occupations.

All of the essays in this special issue attempt to address language acquisition, a difficult process to discern in the documentary record. How did the diverse speakers of Nahuatl about whom our authors write so compellingly learn to speak or write Nahuatl, and to what degree of proficiency? Christensen and J. Schwaller, who write about the colonial Church, have the most definitive answers. Recognizing the insurmountable challenge that multilingualism posed to the evangelical project, Philip II in 1570 authorized Nahuatl as the lingua franca of conversion and the training of missionary priests in Nahuatl. According to J. Schwaller's essay, Church and imperial language policies that supported the use of Nahuatl had some effect, such that by 1575, approximately 65 percent of secular clergy spoke at least one indigenous language, most often Nahuatl. However, as Christensen argues, most Nahuatl-speaking clergy did not know the language well and thus relied on native *fiscales* to translate and communicate the doctrine to Nahuatl speakers.

Matthew and Romero contend that Central Mexican military allies and auxiliaries of the Spanish conquistadors introduced Nahuatl to the places in which they settled and served as colonial administrators. The preponderance of Pipil among Matthew and Romero's data set of Nahuatl-language documents suggests that Pipil speakers may have bolstered the use of Nahuatl in their roles as itinerant or immigrant scribes. Although Spaniards and Central Mexicans considered Pipil to be inferior to Classical Nahuatl, Pipil appears to have been good enough for bureaucratic purposes, primarily in the production of notarial and legal documents. Indeed, Matthew and Romero speculate that Pipil may have served more as a vehicular language in Guatemala than did central Mexican Nahuatl.

How did the unofficial interpreters of the Inquisition—Nahuatl-speaking Spaniards living in the diocese of Michoacan—or the mulato ritual specialist who figures in R. Schwaller's essay acquire their Nahuatl? The answers are more elusive in these cases, and the authors encourage us to speculate about the possibilities of immersion through the intimacy of everyday interactions, whether sexual, ritual, or commercial. The question of language acquisition compels us to consider the intersections of language, culture, and society beyond the confines of purportedly “indige-

nous” and “nonindigenous” worlds, or the worlds of one indigenous group or another, and to rethink the boundaries that we have drawn around them.

The essays in this special issue suggest new directions for the study of the social history of language in New Spain. Historians of colonial Mesoamerica have been blessed with rich native language documentation, though only a minority of Mesoamerica’s languages are represented in the documentary corpus. How did colonial subjects deploy different languages in everyday life, and why might they have chosen to use one language rather than another? How did regional forms of languages develop and how did they bridge multilingualism? How did language ideologies—“socially held understandings of the nature and appropriate use of language and the ways in which languages are classified, hierarchized, and related to social groups”—develop locally and colony-wide, in quotidian and institutional settings?¹⁰ How might we find out? These are the invitations to new scholarship that the following essays issue.

Notes

- 1 The authors of this issue would like to provide a quick note on definitions for our interdisciplinary audience. The term *lingua franca* applies to any language used as a medium of communication between peoples speaking mutually unintelligible languages. In this context, it is a third language or bridge language, a definition applicable to some of the contexts of Nahuatl use in the articles that follow. In order to avoid the impression of prevalent bilingualism in Nahuatl and local languages, Laura E. Matthew and Sergio F. Romero use the term *vehicular language* instead of *lingua franca*. We also use the term *quotidian*, or *common language*, to refer to situations in which bilingual and multilingual individuals spoke Nahuatl in order to make themselves understood in everyday settings. In these contexts, Nahuatl represented a preferred medium of communication. Whether it is used as a *lingua franca*, *vehicular language*, or *quotidian language*, the articles in this issue highlight the important role of Nahuatl in facilitating communication and transmission of culture in colonial Mesoamerica.
- 2 For a history of the New Philology and its more recent trajectories, see Matthew Restall, “A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History,” *Latin American Research Review* 38, no. 1 (2003): 113–34. See also James Lockhart, Lisa Sousa, and Stephanie Wood, eds., *Sources and Methods for the Study of Postconquest Mesoamerican Ethnohistory* (Eugene, OR, 2010), whp.uoregon.edu/Lockhart/index.html.
- 3 Landmark studies include James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA, 1992); Robert Haskett, *Indigenous Rulers: An Ethnohistory of Town Government in Colonial Cuernavaca* (Norman, OK, 1991); Caterina Pizzigoni, *Testaments of Toluca* (Stanford, CA, 2006); James Lockhart, Frances Berdan, and Arthur J. O. Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545–1627* (Salt Lake City, UT, 1986); and Susan Kellogg and Matthew Restall, eds., *Dead Giveaways:*

- Indigenous Testaments of Colonial Mesoamerica and the Andes* (Salt Lake City, UT, 1998).
- 4 Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson, AZ 1989), 5; Louise M. Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahuatl Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (Philadelphia, 1996); *Nahuatl Theater*, vols. 1–4, ed. Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart (Norman, OK, 2004); Louise M. Burkhart and Barry D. Sell (Norman, OK, 2009); Louise M. Burkhart, ed., *Aztecs on Stage: Religious Theater in Colonial Mexico*, trans. Louise M. Burkhart, Barry D. Sell, and Stafford Poole (Norman, OK, 2011).
 - 5 John K. Chance, *Conquest of the Sierra: Spaniards and Indians in Colonial Oaxaca* (Norman, OK, 1989), esp. chap. 2; Yanna Yannakakis, *The Art of Being In-Between: Native Intermediaries, Indian Identity, and Local Rule in Colonial Oaxaca* (Durham, NC, 2008), esp. chap. 6; Yanna Yannakakis, “The Indios Conquistadores of Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte: From Indian Conquerors to Local Indians,” in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, ed. Laura Matthew and Michel Oudijk (Norman, OK, 2007), 227–53.
 - 6 For the use of Nahuatl by Dominican friars in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, see Chance, *Conquest*, 21–22, 124–25, 155, 175.
 - 7 Nahuatl use in Oaxaca represents one research area in my new book project, “Mexico’s Babel: Translation, Law, and Society in Oaxaca from Colony to Republic.”
 - 8 Archivo Histórico Judicial de Oaxaca, Villa Alta Criminal, leg. 6, exp. 0003 (1698), “En averiguación del robo que sufrieron Baltasar Miguel y Sebastian Gomes de Totontepeque (en el Monte de Tanga).”
 - 9 According to Alonso Barros, this particular expression of language politics facilitated Zapotec appropriation of Mixe lands through the Spanish legal system over the course of the colonial period. See Alonso Barros van Hövell tot Westerflieer, “Cien años de guerras Mixes: Territorialidades prehispánicas, expansión burocrática, y zapotecización en el Istmo de Tehuantepec durante el siglo XVI,” *Historia Mexicana* 57, no. 2 (2007): 325–403.
 - 10 Alan Durston provides concise overviews of the social history of language and language ideologies and deftly uses these concepts to analyze translation and evangelization in colonial Peru. See Alan Durston, *Pastoral Quechua: The History of Christian Translation in Colonial Peru, 1550–1650* (Bloomington, IN, 2007), 9–10. On the social history of language, see Peter Burke, “The Social History of Language,” in *The Art of Conversation* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), 1–33; and Peter Burke, *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK, 2004). For literature on language ideology and language politics, see Paul V. Kroskrity, ed., *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities* (Santa Fe, NM, 2000); and Bambi B. Schlieffen, Kathryn A. Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity, eds., *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory* (Oxford, UK, 1998). For comparative scholarship that integrates the social history of language with language ideology and politics in colonial settings, see Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880–1938* (Berkeley, CA, 1991); Bruce Mannheim, *The Language of the Inka since the European Invasion* (Austin, TX, 1991); and M. Kittya Lee, “Conversing in Colony: The Brasilica and the Vulgar in Portuguese America, 1500–1759,” PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2006.