Multilingualism, Colonialism, and the Nation-State: Nahuatl-Spanish Bilingualism in Mexico

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Introduction

Multilingualism has historically always been prominent in the Valley of Mexico - today, however, while it may remain so in pockets, indigenous communities are largely surrounded by monolingual Spanish-speaking communities. In this paper, we will explore the historical basis and evolution of multilingualism in Central Mexico from the period of Spanish conquest to the present, exploring the complexities of the Spanish-Nahuatl interaction that emerged in the colonial period, and understanding the reasons for its disappearance as a large-scale phenomenon. Mackey (2012) speaks of bilingualism and multilingualism as a "double continuum of mutually modifying practices," with a pair or group of languages all interacting in the speaker's daily usage; he then motivates from this the idea that the study of multilingualism and bilingualism is necessarily "multidimensional," with speakers' intensity and depth of usage across domains shapes languages' existence in the multilingual realm. In this vein, we will seek to understand here the complex multilingualism that emerged from the colonial cultural encounter, mediated as it was by religious, national, and geographical identities. The Spaniards, came upon their initial arrival with a set of millenarian religious beliefs, and a worldview in which the indigenous peoples, 'pagans', had a very clear place: as such, the twelve Franciscan friars (*Los doce apóstoles de México*) who began the process of converting the Nahua peoples to Christianity were primarily interested in Nahuatl as a mode of dissemination of the gospel, and trained indigenous scribes in Spanish and Latin to aid their proselytizing efforts.

That is not to say, however, that the pre-Columbian world of the Aztec empire was a monolingual one; there were at least 40 languages spoken in the empire, as per Hill (2016)'s estimate, including various Nahuan, Uto-Aztecan, Oto-Manguean, Mixe-Zoquean, Mayan and isolate languages. Hill also states, with

support from Valiñas (2010), that there is very little evidence that the Aztecs pursued any "policies of language planning or language officialization," given the way the empire was organized as an indirectly managed set of tributary states. That being said, however, Central Nahuatl was without doubt a widely-used lingua franca in the period immediately predating conquest, with a distinct "koine" form existing for inter-ethnic communication, and evidence existing for usage of Nahuatl far south into Mesoamerica (Dakin 2010). However, the absence of linguistic policy did not preclude ideology: the Aztecs considered Nahuatl to be the only refined form of speech, with other varieties often referred to in derisive terms such as "*popoloca,"* a word meaning to babble or mumble incoherently. Aztec understandings of language were often framed in terms of 'cultured' and 'barbarian' tongues, as captured by the ethnographic work of the friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the mid-1500s, whose records form much of our contemporary understanding of Mexica culture as it was practiced; indeed, the high-register speech of the nobles, the *huehuetlatolli,* was considered the paragon of linguistic achievement (Horn 2014). As such, one understands that pre-colonial multilingualism was widespread but negotiated in necessarily unequal and imperialistic terms: with Nahuatl as the predominant language of administration and inter-ethnic communication, local languages continued to be practiced by the communities they were spoken in.

However, despite the fact that Spanish too arrived on imperialistic terms, and that conquest was followed by a period of rapid cultural destruction and shift, on the linguistic front, the colonial period was host to a surprisingly fertile milieu of bilingualism in Nahuatl-speaking areas. Indeed, unlike the rest of the continent, Mesoamerican societies after the conquest "developed a widespread tradition of writing in indigenous languages using the Latin alphabet introduced by the Europeans." In the Valley of Mexico, friars began training children of indigenous elites and *tlacuilos,* or scribes, in Latin and Spanish, producing a generation of 'trilinguals' who could negotiate both worlds (Ehrenmen 2016); within a few generations, use of the script had spread, and over three centuries Nahuatl-speaking communities assimilated writing and "used it prolifically, producing an extremely rich and complex corpus of written texts that attests to the vitality of their culture across the colonial period" (Olko and Sullivan 2015).

However, the relative autonomy indigenous communities had enjoyed in terms of language through the colonial period began to decline, somewhat ironically, following Mexican Independence in 1821; at independence, native communities constituted over seventy percent of the population of Central Mexico; by 1980, that number was twelve percent. Schryer (1990) argues that this is primarily due to a cultural rather than a demographic shift: the new national government made the writing of legal documents and the litigation of cases in Nahuatl illegal, insisting that it be done in Spanish; Schryer goes on to describe the works of the nascent Mexican state as being nothing less than a "a systematic policy of cultural genocide" resulting in "the increasing loss of native languages, including Nahuatl." Indeed, the context of the birth of the Mexican nation is to be found amidst the European nationalisms of the 19th century, which were most often "assimilatory" and "homogeniz[ing]" (Wimmer and Feinstein 2010), insisting on a national truth of single language and a single people. In Mexico, this found its form in the principle of *mestizaje*, the idea of a common race formed from indigenous and Spanish roots, "the cosmic race" (Gutiérrez 1998). The cultural archetype of the *mestizo,* a Spanish-speaking, Catholic figure, was at the heart of the new national identity, one based on "mythologized version of Mexico's indigenous past" (Olko and Sullivan 2014), but one that sought to remove native groups, who were seen as an obstacle to "modernity" and "progress." As such, I argue in this paper that it was not the colonial period that caused the ultimate decline of Nahuatl and a number of indigenous languages in Central Mexico; in fact, it was instead the birth of the post-colonial nation state that ultimately suppressed and hastened the decline of indigenous tongues due to the creation of a singular 'Mexican', Spanish-speaking identity drawing on the idea of *mestizaje.* In doing so, I seek to illustrate the the surprisingly robust multilingualism of the colonial period, using Nahuatl as a focal point, and then draw on historical sources to construct the nation state's primacy as a cause of the monolingual dominance of Spanish.

Spanish-Nahuatl Bilingualism in the Colonial Period

While the colonial authorities of newly-founded New Spain came convinced of their own linguistic superiority, a number of conflicting aims resulted in the widespread continuation of the usage of indigenous languages. In fact, it appears from an analysis of the literature that one could cautiously posit

an intellectual flowering of sorts as Nahuatl speakers “took up the pen with skill” and “delight” as “agents of their own discourses and agendas” (McDonough 2016). We find linguistic production that is both traditional and European-influenced, from traditional year-count annals to poetry, plays and written records of land titles - most interestingly, these continue to have a significant “pictorial and glyphic component”(Olko and Sullivan 2015), drawing on the extensive pre-Columbian tradition of Nahua pictorial ‘writing’ to produce multi-layered texts that convey a rich array of meaning. There are bilingual codices, most famously the Florentine Codex and the Codex Boturini; we see the birth of syncretistic written forms, as “pictorial year-count records” become “alphabetized” and flourish as “written historical annals”; we see “tribute lists” become “censuses”, and pre-Hispanic map traditions merge with the colonial “alphabetic land titles.” The genesis of this cross-cultural fertilization began in the early years succeeding conquest, as friars began teaching writing to the local nobility and scribal schools in Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, and Spanish orthography was adopted rapidly. Olko and Sullivan write that this process was “facilitated by the fact that Spanish had close equivalents for the majority of phonetic elements in the native language,” conventions emerged such as using two Spanish letters to represent the native “*tl*” and “*tz*” sounds, and were “immediately reshaped by native scribes and authors,” with “scribes in each town” taking over “the process of preparing their successors.”

Another key set of bilingual works in the early colonial period included Spanish-Nahuatl grammars, starting with the *Arte de la lengua mexicana y castellana* by Alonso de Molina, a Franciscan priest who grew up fluently speaking Nahuatl; we also see Antonio del Rincón, a descendant of Texcocoan nobility and ordained Jesuit who wrote the *Arte Mexicana,* the first native-produced grammar of Nahuatl (McDonough 2016). Grammars were written primarily to support the task of indigenous conversion to Christianity - as such, languages become “instruments of Christianization,” and bilingualism takes place in a primarily religious context. McDonough goes on describe how Rincón moth models his work on and subverts the norms of Latin grammar as exemplified to by the works of the Latin/Castilian grammarian Antonio de Nebrija - he replaces a section on syntax with one on ‘*composiciones’* (compositions), describing the rules of the word construction in polysynthetic Nahuatl. Thus, we have a sense of a conscious, metalinguistic bilingualism in which the linguistic traditions of two hemispheres are

interacting with one another. In the early colonial period, proselytizing efforts remained a significant source of bilingualism, with the work of Sahagún, mentioned earlier, being a notable example as he trained trilingual informants to elicit information in Nahuatl, deliver it to friars in Spanish, and construct Nahuatl-language texts recording the information gathered.

We also see, however, as indigenous communities themselves incorporated the written word into Nahuatl, the emergence of new, localized written forms - for instance, in the mid-to-late colonial period, the "*títulos primordiales,"* which capture indigenous histories and land titles in story form, or the large corpora of mundane documents recording legal and economic issues. (Olko and Sullivan 2015)

It appears though, however, that no matter how tolerant colonial authorities were of multilingual situations, it was rarely without external motivations that they acted to maintain Nahuatl as a language of popular discourse. As king, Charles V repeatedly issued decrees insisting that all natives be instructed in the Catholic faith in Castilian, rather than in Spanish (La Rosa 1995), only for later regimes to reverse that policy and insist that Nahuatl be the language of religious conversion when it was determined to be more efficacious. (Hinz 2008). Furthermore, linguistic ideologies connecting knowledge of Castilian to greater intellectual capacity, as well as the relation of language to power shaped the dynamics of bilingualism throughout the colonial era - for instance, a seventeenth century reporter once considered that when Indians "learn the Spanish tongue", they become "ladinos" *(cunning),* and become "impudent" - "while they speak their own language, they are more humble," he concludes (Heath 1972). Indeed, the politics of bilingualism and enforced monolingualism were also motivated by a desire to maintain existing power structures and exclude 'Indians' from public discourse and shaping policy.

Independent Mexico and Indigenous Languages

In 1821, the Spanish colony of New Spain declared independence, creating the newly formed Mexican Empire and then soon after, a federal republic. The newly-formed nation rapidly began to advocate for a distinct Mexican identity, and sought to create a single, unified culture for all Mexicans. Linguistically,

this logically seemed to mean one nation under one language: as politicians and public figures railed against dividing the nation in any way, political discourse came to question the utility of indigenous languages in a 'modern' nation-state. According to Heath (1972), prominent political figures at the time of independence believed that for the sake of unity, "Indians could not be singled out for special treatment" - as such, with education policy largely conducted in Castilian, Nahuatl and other indigenous languages were already dealt a blow. Any "special provisions for the Indian" were to result in the "strengthening of separate Indian nations" and "weakening of the nation's unity" - under colonial rule, ethnic and linguistic divisions could continue to exist as long as the colonies continued to exact tribute: however, now, the state created the new category of the citizen, a unitary relationship between individual and state; there was then a rapid drive, at least in principle, toward homogeneity. According to Olko and Sullivan (2016), legal and land records ceased to be recorded in local indigenous languages too; this, as we have seen, was a major part of the continuation and maintenance of the Nahuatl local scribal tradition - as such, the institution of Spanish as the language of administration further weakened indigenous autonomy and reduced the role of Nahuatl in daily life.

One member of parliament, José María Luis Mora, triumphantly declared that "Indians no longer exist" (Heath 1972). Now, while the construction of "*los indios"* as a group was premised at leveling indigenous heterogeneity and maintaining racial distinctions, the alternative now meant complete assimilation; Native populations were to discard their notions of village, clan, and family loyalty, instead becoming "citizens" and assimilating into *mestizo* or *criollo* culture. Schryer (1990) describes "a process of rapid linguistic assimilation" occurring in Central Mexico "between 1840 and 1850"; "several large areas of completely monolingual Spanish speakers" by the end of the 19th century, and almost none by the middle of the 20th. When in 1821, native-language speaking communities were found in almost every part of the Valley of Mexico and its surrounds, why was there a near-disappearance of native languages over less than 100 years after 300 years of co-existence?

One can argue that strong negative associations took root with relation to 'Indian' identity over the course of the colonial period, resulting in the widespread rejection of such an identity after Independence; while

this may play a part, I argue instead that it is the concept of the nation-state, and the particularities of its emergence in the 19th century, that led to this decline. The nation-state fundamentally seeks out homogeneity; in the creation of a national mythology, it seeks to unite disparate groups of people within a unifying framework, a transaction between the state and the individual. May (2016) states that there is an emphasis on "linguistic homogeneity within modern nation-states" which in turn "specifically disadvantages minority language speakers" - this certainly was the case in Central Mexico, and remains that way even today.

Nahuatl and Multilingualism Today

Olko and Sullivan (2014) characterize Nahuatl today in Mexico as being engaged in a "conflictive, substitutive, and diglossic bilingualism" with Spanish, "leading to a new monolingualism" in the near future. They attribute this to "a widespread attitude of racism", and "an accelerating, discriminatory educational and mass media policy of Hispanicization"resulting in the decline and virtual elimination of "intergenerational transfer of the language in Nahua communities." Unfortunately, even as the United Nations declared the Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019, urging member states to join together and "providing support for the establishment of an indigenous led fund dedicated to the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages," (United Nations, 2017) even Nahuatl, the most-spoken indigenous language in Mexico, remains in decline through the country despite having over a million speakers, with less than 10% of speakers monolingual.

Rolstad (2000) in her work on Nahuatl's decline across Central Mexico shows the steady increase in Spanish-preferring bilingualism - native speakers seem to hold "shame to have been raised speaking Nahuatl," and most non-speakers seem to consider it a "*dialecto,"* a broken tongue that cannot come close to approximating Spanish. In her interviews with speakers, she found that they tended to "avoid speaking Nahuatl within earshot of monolingual Spanish speakers," even insisting on "speak[ing] only Spanish to their children" in the hopes of elevating their social status. Even in the presence of revitalization efforts,

attempting to bring up the status of historically low-prestige languages will remain difficult; despite the presence of legislation such as the *Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas,* which declares in its text (in translation) that "the diversity of indigenous languages is one of the major expressions of the multicultural composition of the Mexican nation,"significant challenges will remain in remedying the centuries-long oppression of indigenous languages.

Bilingual education programs have been instituted in parts of the country (Rolstad 2000), but Olko and Sullivan (2014) insist that Hispanization remains an "unquestionable imperative" in indigenous education (Flores Farfán, 2002). As such, significant steps remain in building non-assimilatory, pluralistic frameworks within heterogenous nation states; a decentralized system of education with local curricula might be key to the survival of indigenous languages as a whole. The measures proposed in the UN's year, while encouraging, only "invites Member States, in close cooperation with indigenous peoples, UNESCO and other relevant agencies of the United Nations system, to participate actively in the planning of the Year," and seem to limit national involvement to "rais[ing] awareness of and plan[ning] specific activities for the Year" - while this might be useful in the context of raising global awareness of an increasingly critical problem, and in the Mexican context, raise the profile of indigenous languages, the UN document does not seem to call states to introduce long-term legislation to benefit indigenous languages. As such, it remains unclear how this will affect the situation of indigenous languages in Mexico, and it is likely to simply be a one-time effort.

Conclusions

Overall, the history of post-Conquest Nahuatl in Mexico can be divided into two distinct phases: one pre-dating the existence of the modern Mexican nation-state, and the second succeeding it. While significant pressures were exerted on Nahuatl and Nahuatl speakers throughout the colonial period, there continued to be significant literary and artistic production in the language; however, succeeding the formation of the nation-state and the promotion of a singular "Mexican" identity seems to have resulted in strong language

shift and “conflictive, diglossic bilingualism” (Olko and Sullivan, 2014) that continues to erode the language today. As such, there is a need for large-scale policy, both educational and social, to restore the profile of indigenous languages in Mexico, and to encourage and promote their use in the public sphere; until then, the future of Nahuatl, and other indigenous languages, remains uncertain.

Honor Code:

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

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