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García, Ricardo

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Where Bilingualism Mattered: Nahuatl on the Western and Northern Frontiers of New Spain

Ricardo García
UCLA

ABSTRACT

*During the colonial period (1521–1821), translators facilitated the expansion and preservation of Spanish rule in what is now Mexico. Doña Marina relied on her knowledge of Nahuatl, Maya, and Spanish to aid the Spanish forces led by Hernán Cortés, and the individual situations where she became a translator can be considered episodes of translation, but episodes with other translators are less well known. This study examines two episodes where translators relied on Nahuatl as a mediating language on the frontiers of Spanish hegemony, and it proposes that Nahuatl served as a lingua franca in these areas.**

KEYWORDS: *ladino, Nahuas, Nahuatl, Nahuatlato, New Philology, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Spaniard, theory of language relativity, and thick description.*

I. INTRODUCTION. From 1519 to 1521, Doña Marina played a crucial role in the downfall of the Aztec Empire because as a speaker of Mayan, Nahuatl, and Spanish, she facilitated communications between the Spaniards, their allies, and the Nahua Indians who opposed them.¹ She acted as an interpreter, and she aided the Spaniards because of what Nahuas, native Nahuatl-speakers, had accomplished in Mesoamerica. First, Nahuas from the city-states of Tenochtitlan, Tetzoco, and Tlacopan created the Aztec Empire, which controlled most of central Mexico except for some territories, the most important of which was occupied by the Nahuas of Tlaxcala, their enemies.² Second, many sources suggest that when the Europeans arrived, Nahuas lived beyond the borders of the Aztec Empire.³ Third, Nahuas had such an important social, political,

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and economic impact in Mesoamerica that in some regions, Nahuatl functioned as a *lingua franca* (Dakin et al. 2009, Vail & Hernandez 2010).

This situation began to change when central Mexico became a part of the Hapsburg Empire, but some Indian peoples in western and northern Mexico remained independent, and sources suggest that they also relied on translators to communicate with their neighbors. Tonalá was an independent Indian community in the valley of Atemajac, where Guadalajara would later be built, and in 1530, it hosted an expedition of Nahuas and Spaniards led by Nuño de Guzmán. Farther to the north, Butus and Francisco Enagori, two Indians, went to Culiacan to talk to the Spaniard Antonio Ruiz around 1593. This study argues that these are two episodes of translation where European and Indian participants spoke Nahuatl as a mediating language, and it examines how NAHUATLATO and LADINO IN THE MEXICAN⁴ LANGUAGE were employed in these episodes.

2. **METHODOLOGY.** This study relies on methodologies developed by scholars of the New Philology. It is a school of thought characterized by its emphasis on accessing alphabetic documents written in Indian languages. James Lockhart (1992: 7) outlines its creed in *Nahuas after the Conquest*,

Done by Nahuas for Nahua eyes and for the purposes of everyday life, these documents, though most of them are ostensible in Spanish genres, are not only more individual in their language, conventions, and content than the Spanish counterparts, but more complex in belonging to two traditions rather than one . . . A realization of their nature has called for a New Philology to render them understandable . . . and put them in their true context.

This is a good start, but an analysis of these episodes also requires other methodologies.

Lev Vygotsky relies on psychology as a conceptual tool to study culture and consciousness, and in *Thought and Language*, he examines the elementary relationship between a thought, a word, and its meaning (Kozulin *apud* Vygotsky 1986: xv). Vygotsky suggests that human consciousness is a social construct mediated by language and created during the growth of an individual. He opines that, ‘meaning is an elementary “cell” that represents the most elementary form of the unity between thought and word’, and that ‘word meanings evolve’ (Vygotsky 1986 [1934]: 212).

These two assertions affect the study of Mexico where Spanish sources refer to a bilingual individual as either a LADINO or a NAHUATLATO. Ladino implied cultural assimilation because Spaniards used it to refer to those non-Spaniards who had assimilated to Spanish culture like Africans, Indians, Moors, and castas (Adorno 1994: 378). Less is known about nahuatlato, but it appears to come from *nahuati* (to make a clear sound) or *nahuatia* (to advise or give orders to someone), and *tlatoni* (speaker), and this word came to refer to an interpreter (Karttunen 1992, Lockhart 2001).⁵ These two words and their meanings are thus historical keys because they reflect the consciousness of colonial Spaniards and Nahuas.⁶

Meanwhile, in *The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language*, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956 [1941]) compares and contrasts several Indo-European languages to Hopi, and he not only postulates that language patterns and cultural norms grow up together influencing each other, but he also theorizes that a native language limits change and rigidifies channels of development for its speakers. In other words, the forms and expressions of a native language preserve beliefs and customs that may no longer be practiced by its speakers. For example, the sun neither rises nor sets, but before the Enlightenment, this is what English speakers believed, and the expression remains. Furthermore, the close connection between culture and language affects historical understanding because many words in one language cannot be directly translated into another without some dissonance. For example, Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón was a native Spanish-speaker, and his *Treatise of the Heathen Superstitions* suggests that he achieved some fluency with Nahuatl because he writes that *ticitl*, 'is used for what is expressed by our word 'doctor', but entering more deeply into it, it is accepted among the [Nahua] natives as meaning sage, doctor, seer, and sorcerer, or, perhaps, one who has a pact with the devil' (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984 [1629]: 157). Nahuas would not completely agree, and these competing viewpoints illustrate what is known as either the theory of language relativity or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Also, the sources used in this study were created by people who described and interpreted the actions of others who were very different from themselves. These require an ethnographic approach, and Clifford Geertz has written the best description of how to do this. First, Geertz (1973: 5) accepts Max Weber's assertion that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,' and Geertz 'takes culture

to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning'. This search requires a 'thick description' of human interactions that require the conceptualization of human behaviors as symbolic actions analyzed for their significance (Geertz 1973: 10). Therefore, Geertz postulates that 'culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described' (Geertz 1973: 14).

3. NAHUATLATOS IN TONALA. On December 23, 1529, a joint Nahuatl-Spanish expedition of some 300 Spaniards and 10,000 Nahuas departed Mexico City, and they went on to explore what is now western and northwestern Mexico.⁷ However, they committed atrocities even against Indian communities that had already submitted to the Spanish king. Later, the crown ordered an investigation into the conduct of its leader, Nuño de Guzmán. In 1534, judges questioned some of the Spanish participants, and court scribes transcribed their utterances, which preserve an episode in Tonalá that involved several *nahuatlátos*.

The testimonies of Juan de Sámano, García del Pilar, and an unknown witness are crucial because each one provides a different perspective of what happened in Tonalá (García Icazbalceta 1866). Juan de Sámano was one of Nuño de Guzmán's captains, and he spoke in a tone that was sympathetic to Nuño de Guzmán. Meanwhile, García del Pilar was a *nahuatlato* who had participated in the downfall of the Aztec Empire, but he gained a reputation for dishonesty during the 1520s in Mexico City (García Icazbalceta 1866: xliii). He became one of the translators of this expedition, and in his testimony, he sought to separate himself from its more controversial actions (García Icazbalceta 1866: xliii). The unknown witness may have been Captain Cristóbal Flores, or someone else, but regardless of who he was, he writes in a manner hostile to Nuño de Guzmán (García Icazbalceta 1866: xliii).

These witnesses describe their arrival at Tonalá in a similar way. Juan de Sámano (*apud* García Icazbalceta 1866: 269) testified, 'some lords that were there [in Cuitzeo] provided porters, and they themselves went with us, and they guided us to an unpopulated community where we slept that night [and] some horsemen brought two Indians who said that they were from Tonalá'. Meanwhile, García del Pilar (*apud* García Icazbalceta 1866: 252) said that from Cuitzeo, 'we were walked to the province of

Tonala, where we arrived after four days, more or less . . . and at the sight of this town [Tonala], two Indians went out . . .'. Finally, the unknown witness (*apud* García Icazbalceta 1866: 441) explained that after all of the temples of Cuitzeo had been burned, the expedition left, 'toward Tonala, and stopped two days on the road, and when they arrived, certain nahuatlatos of peace went out [from Tonala] . . .'.

Testimonies of García del Pilar and the unknown witness diverge from that of Juan de Sámano because they provide more details of what followed. García del Pilar (*apud* García Icazbalceta 1866: 252) testified that the two Indians said, 'the lady of that province wanted peace, and that all of them wanted to serve like the others, except that one of her daughters with others . . . had rebelled and placed themselves in a hill within sight of her home . . .'. The unknown witness (*apud* García Icazbalceta 1866: 441) agreed and explained,

the nahuatlatos of peace were saying that the lady of that town [of Tonala] had had news of how we had gone and arrived at the first town [Cuitzeo] . . . we found a crone with many female Indians together at a house who was saying that she was the lady of that town [of Tonala] and that within sight of it, there was a hill where there appeared to be up to a thousand warriors making a comotion. . . .

Meanwhile, Juan de Sámano (*apud* García Icazbalceta 1866: 269) only testified,

the leader [Nuño de Guzman] sent [word] to Tonala for them to call the lords, and the next morning the *maestre de campo* went forward . . . and once he [*maestre*] came back, he said that it did not look good because they had holed up in a tall, rocky hill . . . although one district of nahuatlatos remained in their homes and gave fruit and water. . . .

These differences are present because García del Pilar and the unknown witness probably attended this meeting and Juan de Sámano did not. García del Pilar went to this event as a nahuatlato and testified as he did because he could understand Nahuatl, which was almost certainly used in the meeting between the lady of Tonala, the representatives of Nuño de Guzmán, and the nahuatlatos of both sides. He was also known to lie, but he lacked a reason here because this negotiation and the subsequent battle of Tonala were one of the least controversial actions of

this expedition. Meanwhile, Juan de Sámano was a warrior who played a prominent role in battles, which he describes with minute details, but he may have played a lesser role in more peaceful endeavors because he provided only superficial details about negotiations with the female ruler of Tonalá. Finally, the unknown witness may have been a *nahuatlato*, the *maestro de campo*, or one of their friends because he mentions two details that the others omit: the advanced age of the lady of Tonalá and the presence of her female companions.

During the meeting, the two most probable chains of translation involve Nahuatl. Two scholars theorize that upon the arrival of the Nuño de Guzmán expedition, the Tecuexes lived within Tonalá, between a large Tarascanan polity with Purepecha-speaking leaders to the south and the Nahuá Cazcanes to the northeast (Bauz de Czitrom 1982: 13. Yáñez-Rosales 2001: 60). As a result, they needed *nahuatlato*s to speak either Nahuatl, Purepecha, or both languages. In fact, neither Juan de Sámano, García del Pilar, nor the unknown witness mention what language was used, but the Nuño de Guzmán expedition contained *nahuatlato*s that spoke Nahuatl, Purepecha, and Spanish (Razo Zaragoza 1963, Yáñez Rosales 1998). García del Pilar spoke Nahuatl and Spanish, and he, along with another *nahuatlato* had been a part of the expedition from the beginning. Then, in January 1530, the expedition arrived within the borders of a Tarascan polity whose leader provided Purepecha *nahuatlato*s. A key question is whether these Purepecha *nahuatlato*s spoke Spanish or Nahuatl as their other language. The latter is more likely for a variety of reasons. First, the unknown witness and others neglected the term *ladino* and employed *nahuatlato*. The latter is often found in sources that refer to Spaniards such as García del Pilar who knew an Indian language, but what about those times when this term is used to refer to an Indian? Should it be assumed that Indian *nahuatlato*s spoke Spanish as one of their other languages? No, because several scholars have discovered that few Indians adopted Spanish during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Haskett 1991, Terraciano 2001). Second, the Tarascan leader ruled a polity that, only ten years earlier, had shared a southern border with the Aztec Empire. Third, in 1530, this polity had a Spanish overlord, but few Spaniards lived nearby, and it contained many Nahuas within its borders (Ricard 1986 [1947]: 141). Finally, it was only a short distance from the Nahuatl-speaking Cazcanes who lived to the northeast. Therefore, the

two most likely chains of translation were Spanish→Nahuatl→Tecuexe and back or Spanish→Nahuatl→Purepecha→Tecuexe and back.

Afterwards, the Nahuas and Spaniards fought and defeated Tonalá's warriors. The victors went on to found several towns including Guadalajara and San Miguel de Culiacan, and the lands that they traveled and explored came to be called Nueva Galicia. As the sixteenth century advanced, Guadalajara and Compostela grew, but Culiacan developed in a more uneven way because it was often cut off from other Spanish settlements by the struggles between its residents, surrounding Indian groups, and European slave raiders.

4. CULIACAN AND ITS LADINOS EN LENGUA MEXICANA. A settler named Antonio Ruiz arrived in Nueva Galicia, and he went on to live in Culiacan and in a community to the north named San Felipe y Santiago. Because he lived an eventful life and had a basic education, the Jesuits encouraged him to write an account of his experiences in this region that he completed between 1595 and 1600 (Nakayama *apud* Ruiz 1992: vi). Scholars have explained that many autobiographical accounts were written by conquistadors who explained their actions to their leaders because they felt they had been wronged or had not received an adequate reward (Brading 1991, Restall 2003, Schroeder 2007). Ruiz appears to have written for other reasons, but like the other writers, he provides valuable ethnographic information about the Europeans and Indians that lived in and around Culiacan.

Ruiz claimed that around 1593, when he was in his house in Culiacan, he was approached by a Guasave Indian named Butus who had brought Francisco Enagori, 'un interprete ladino en la lengua mexicana (an interpreter that was ladino in Nahuatl)' (Ruiz 1992: 60). Ruiz adds that Enagori translated the following,

Butus says that he comes very sad because you, the Spaniards, have deceived them by telling everyone that you are here to help and favor us; [Butus] says that the captain and another went to the other part of Guasave and took the children from the maritime [or Guasave] Indians, and took them to Culiacan to sell, and it was him who took the young ones by the coast, and if this is going to happen this way we do not want to allow you to be in this land if you will take away our children in this way (Ruiz 1992: 60).

Then, Ruiz recalls that he took Butus and Enagori to see the Jesuit father Martín Pérez, and he told this priest what the Indians were saying, and his description of this event suggests that Butus spoke Guasave to Enagori, who spoke Nahuatl to Ruiz (1992: 60).

The first piece of the puzzle is the way that Ruiz employed the word *ladino*.⁸ Sebastián de Covarrubias (*apud* Adorno 1994: 378) wrote a work that was published in 1611 in which he defines this term as ‘referring to any non-native speaker of Castilian who had some proficiency in the language’. Ruiz uses it in this way because in another section of his work, he writes about a group of people that included some ‘of the most *ladino* Indians’ (Ruiz 1992: 60). However, he also claimed that Enagori was an ‘interpreter that was *ladino* in the Nahuatl language’, and that another interpreter named Doña Luisa, ‘was of the utmost importance . . . for being *ladina* in Nahuatl, and in the [Indian] languages of these provinces’ (Ruiz 1992: 60, 74). These three usages suggest that Ruiz employs *ladina*/*ladino* as a synonym for educated because he uses it to refer to Indians who were educated in the Spanish language, and to Indians who were educated in the Nahuatl language. Finally, Ruiz relies on *intérprete* instead of *ladino* to identify an interpreter (Ruiz 1992: 2, 21, 23, 24).

Ruiz makes only this reference about Enagori, but it suggests that this Indian was not a Nahua, and that he may have learned Nahuatl from the Franciscans. First, Enagori was *ladino* in Nahuatl, which meant that he learned Nahuatl as a second language. Second, his first name was Francisco, a common name for students who studied with the Franciscans. Third, the Franciscans were the most active teachers of Nahuatl during the sixteenth century; they began teaching the Christian doctrine in Latin and Nahuatl in New Spain as early as the late 1530s (Lockhart 1992) and in Nueva Galicia by 1569 (Castañeda 1984: 70, 72; Yáñez Rosales 2001: 105).

Ruiz also provides some details of his own life that illustrate that either he spoke Nahuatl and other Indian languages common to Culiacan and its environs, or that he learned Nahuatl, which served as a *lingua franca* for this region. His first documented contact with the language occurred in 1565 when he was eleven or twelve because this is when his widowed father joined the Francisco de Ibarra expedition, which also included the aforementioned Doña Luisa who may have been one of his teachers (Nakayama *apud* Ruiz 1992: i–ii). This is probable because Ruiz makes two statements that suggest an emotional bond

with Luisa. He writes that Francisco de Ibarra spoke to warlike Indians through ‘the tongue of an Indian named Luisa, a native of the province of Culiacan . . . [who] served as interpreter with much loyalty throughout all the journey’ (Ruiz 1992: 2). Then, he refers to her as ‘that nice old lady’, and to her daughter as, ‘a very good Indian’ (Ruiz 1992: 13, 24). Second, he mentions several instances where he spoke to Indians in their language. He explains that he spoke to the Indians of Amabache in their language, and on another occasion, he writes about speaking to a Tehueco Indian, and an accompanying priest asked what the Indian had said, and he answered that the Indian said a Spanish captain and his companions were killed (Ruiz 1992: 27, 37–38). Finally, by identifying several Indians as ‘mexicanos (Nahuas)’, he implies a knowledge of this language (Ruiz 1992: 11, 13).

5. **CONCLUSION.** This study has presented evidence from western and northern Mexico that suggests that Europeans and Indians relied on Nahuatl to communicate, and that speakers of Spanish and Nahuatl had developed two different terms to describe translators who spoke Nahuatl. First, it presented testimonies from three Spaniards about how their expedition communicated with the female ruler of Tonalá and her interpreters. These witnesses described a complex diplomatic situation where both Europeans and Indians relied on some non-Nahua translators who spoke Nahuatl to bridge their large cultural chasm. They also suggest that the term *Nahuatlato* referred to a person that spoke Nahuatl and another language. Second, in Culiacan, Ruiz wrote of meeting Butus and Francisco, a non-Nahua who spoke Nahuatl. Then, Ruiz quoted what Francisco told him about Butus’s situation. Ruiz never specifically wrote that he was translating Francisco’s Nahuatl utterance, but his words and phrases suggest that this is what he did. He also provided information implying that Luisa was his first Nahuatl teacher, and that a *ladino* in the Mexican language was a non-Nahua that had learned to speak Nahuatl.

NOTES

1. I use **NAHUA** to denote a native Nahuatl speaker, but I employ **SPANIARD** in a slightly different manner because I use it to denote a fluent Spanish-speaker whether or not he or she was a native Spanish speaker.

2. James Lockhart (1992: 14) refers to the basic Nahua polity as an ethnic states ethnic state, but I employ city-state because it brings to mind pre-modern

polities that contained several thousand peoples and controlled a territory that varied in size (i.e. a Greek city-state like Athens or a Renaissance city-state like Genoa).

3. Nahuatl groups lived throughout Mesoamerica because the Cuzcanes lived close to the Tropic of Cancer, the Nicoya live in what is now Nicaragua, and numerous groups like the Tlaxcalans lived in between.

4. During the colonial period, the term *lengua mexicana* (Mexican language) referred to Nahuatl and *indio mexicano* referred to a native Nahuatl speaker that was usually from the Valley of Mexico.

5. In colonial central Mexico, *tlatoani* (pl: *tlatoque*) means ruler, emperor, or king, and its literal meaning is one who speaks (Karttunen 1992: 266, Lockhart 1992: 238). Nahuatl contains many compound words where the first word functions as an adjective so I suggest that *nahuatlatoque* means either good-sounding speaker or advisor. I also propose that *nahuatlato* is short for *nahuatlatoque*, which is attested in Calvo et al (1993).

6. Vygotsky (1986 [1934]: 256) wrote, 'Consciousness is reflected in a word as the sun in a drop of water. A word relates to consciousness as a living cell relates to a whole organism, as an atom relates to the universe'.

7. These numbers vary depending on the source, but most agree that many thousands of Nahuas were involved (García Icazbalceta 1863, Razo Zaragoza 1963).

8. Adorno (1994) presents the evolution of this term, and how Spaniards applied it to Hispanicized non-Spaniards. Meanwhile, Manuel Aguilar-Moreno (2002) examines how ladino Indians took on different roles in colonial Mexico.

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