

Investigating the native American language Nahuatl

Cultures and Languages in Contact



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Dr. Justyna Olko, head of the "Encounters of the Old and New World" Department, specializes in the history, anthropology and ethnolinguistics of pre-Spanish and early colonial Mesoamerica. The European Research Council (ERC) has awarded her the prestigious Starting Grant of 1.3 million euro for her research project into the indigenous language Nahuatl.

The language dates back to the Aztec empire, and it is still in use today: studying Nahuatl allows us to reconstruct its ongoing evolution, as well as other elements of native American culture

An interest in different cultures and a desire to learn about them have played an important role in European mentality and identity for many centuries. Unfamiliar cultures became especially important in the collective imagination in the wake of the first contact with the inhabitants of the New World. The discovery of a continent not known from Antique or early Christian sources compelled Europeans to rediscover and verify their existing dogmas.

The indigenous people themselves posed a major challenge: Europeans questioned whether native Americans were humans in the same way they were, whether they had souls, whether they were capable of rational thought. Unusual religious practices and rituals gave rise to early reflections on cultural relativism, as well as provoking accusations of cannibalism. As early as the 16th century, interest in other cultures became an important element of scientific investigations, which went on to evolve into anthropology and ethnology.

In 2010, these issues became an inspiration for a research project studying the mechanisms of cross-cultural transfer between Europe and America over the course of almost five centuries, from the conquest of Mexico to the present day. The research team that I lead studies how this contact has affected the language and culture of the Nahua people. We also explore the other side of contact, examining the impact of native languages on Spanish.

One million strong

The culture of the Nahua people, popularly known as the Aztecs, was one of the most important civiliza-

tions of the pre-Columbian New World. The Nahuatl language probably played an important role already in the Teotihuacan empire, which flourished during the first five centuries AD; its influences extended over most of Mesoamerica, as far as the Maya lands. It was also used by the Toltec people, who created a powerful state towards the end of the first millennium AD. During the centuries preceding the arrival of European explorers, Nahuatl became the official language of the Aztec empire. It served as the local *lingua franca*, and it was treated as such by the Spaniards. It was used in administration and communication with different local ethnic groups, as well as by missionaries in their Christianization efforts.

By the 1530s, the Nahua mastered alphabetic writing and initiated a written tradition in their own language; in terms of volume and diversity of genres, Nahuatl corpus remains unmatched by any other local language. Although the written tradition all but disappeared in the 19th century, the language is still used by over a million people. Sadly, this number is dwindling fast, partly due to the fact that in the present-day Mexico, the continuity between ancient cultures and contemporary indigenous societies is frequently ignored. The Nahuas and other native groups are widely discriminated against, in particular in terms of education.

Keeping in touch

Our project goes beyond analyzing the differences between older and modern forms of Nahuatl. Studying them systematically forms a starting point for reconstructing other elements of Nahua culture, such as ways of perceiving the world, religious beliefs, rituals, mythology, various forms of sociopolitical and economic organization, social relationships and structures, as well as kinship systems. We also study the processes of translating and interpreting European concepts, such as legal, political and Christian, and the adaptation of foreign systems of classification. We document ways of cross-cultural transfer by registering and analyzing occurrences of Spanish loanwords, neologisms, semantic changes to traditional vocabulary, calques, and morphological, phonetic and syntactic changes. We study the same phenomena in selected contemporary variants of the language, which had never been compared against its colonial version.

Such juxtaposition of written sources and contemporary ethnolinguistic materials enables us to identify and elucidate the factors driving cultural changes and the mechanisms of intercultural transmission, as well as to find cultural continuity under conditions of intensive contact.



A glimpse into archival research: reading a colonial Nahuatl manuscript. Justyna Olko's project at the "Artes Liberales" Faculty, University of Warsaw, is being conducted with the support of the Foundation for Polish Science (as part of the Focus Programme and Ideas for Poland); in 2012, the project was awarded the Starting Grant as part of the IDEAS Programme of the European Research Council. Partner institutions of the project are Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas in Mexico and Universidad de Sevilla in Spain

We hope to understand why the language has survived in certain locations in spite of strong urbanization and close contact with the Spanish-language circles. Despite sharing obvious and numerous similarities, the modern variants of Nahuatl also reveal profound differences, in particular due to their degree of Hispanization. The variant we focus on, traditional Huastec Nahuatl from northern Veracruz, shares many similarities with the much earlier, colonial language from the region of central Mexico. The changes it has undergone are subtle and can only really be captured by referring to earlier colonial sources – something that has not been done before. We are comparing the Huastecan variant with the Nahuatl used by communities in Tlaxcala and Puebla, which are more urbanized and exposed to more intensive contact with the outside world.

From dictionaries to fairytales

Our experiment also aims to overcome serious academic and ideological boundaries. We implement new ways of collaboration between Western researchers and indigenous students and scholars, who remain widely discriminated against in academic circles. Traditional anthropological approaches tend to see indigenous peoples as passive suppliers of information, which can only be understood and interpreted by anthropologists. In our project, local participants are equal partners, involved in all the elements of the research and co-authoring the results.

The assembled and analyzed lexical resources, coupled with the better understanding we have gleaned of how language behaves and changes under conditions of intense contact and external influence, should provide a useful tool

in preserving endangered cultures. We hope to use our data in our second and parallel project, "Disappearing Languages: Comprehensive Models of Research and Revitalization," carried out as part of the National Programme for the Development of the Humanities.

Its aim is to develop effective strategies for the revitalization of endangered languages, such as Nahuatl in Mexico or Lemko and Vilamovian in Poland. They vary in terms of cultural context, historical background, number of users, existing documentation, and problems faced by the communities that still use them. However, similarities exist in terms of certain forms of discrimination faced by the speakers and threat of survival of the language's continuity or radical limitations to its use. Our project will be centered around a collaboration between researchers and representatives of local communities in Poland and abroad. Working as part of a multicultural circle, we will create materials for studying the languages, such as textbooks, dictionaries, books of fairytales and online resources. For Nahuatl, we are also striving to standardize orthography on the basis of colonial texts and current linguistic understanding. We hope that the results of our work on endangered languages will translate directly into practical and educational activities. ■

Further reading:

- Olko J. (2013). *Insignia of Rank in the Nahua World: From the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century*. University Press of Colorado: Boulder.
- Olko J. (2010). *Meksyk przed konkwestą* [Mexico Before the Conquest]. Warsaw: PIW (won 2010 Klio prize)
- Olko J. (2012). El "otro" y los estereotipos étnicos en el mundo nahua. *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, 44: 165-198, Mexico: UNAM.