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A BOOK IN AN UNWRITTEN LANGUAGE

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**Writing is not something natural**

Among language users in the western culture the difference between written and spoken language is not a fundamental issue; after all, the quick note you scribble about getting home late is no different from the same message delivered orally.

In communities that do not use writing, the attitude towards written language must be radically different. What status, what meaning will a written text in their own language have to speakers who have no way of writing it, but know it only as a spoken medium?

In conventional linguistics we reduce spoken language via tape recordings to writing, thereby transforming the object studied from one medium, one sphere of perception, to another. It is not only a question of our studying human behavior via media foreign to the communities studied – like photographs, written notes and texts, and recordings – it is just as much a question of how these media color and influence our concept of human behavior and human thought; and, to what extent do we control or know what the “reduction” discards.

We thus need to focus also on the linguistic status of our collected written texts in unwritten languages and on the implications of writing an unwritten language.

I wish to report on a book in an unwritten language, on how the text was collected and prepared, the illustrations and the lay-out of the book, how it was

received by the speakers of the language, and the reflections this project has set off in me. The community where the text was collected, a small village in Mexico, is not an extreme case for such a study since people there know what writing is, just not in their own language.

The intention with the book was to return to the community some of the material I had received there and to show the people my esteem for their work and their language; in a spontaneous and naive reaction to the disrespect they and their culture are met with in Mexican society in general, I wanted to present an aspect of their everyday life in an esthetically appealing book, with high quality print and lay-out and on the best paper.

We learn that the Mesoamerican culture went under, was obliterated; however, that is only half the truth. The more blatant and conspicuous manifestations of their culture have been terminated, yes, but the basic foods, the preparation of them, and many other traditional activities – something central to any culture – are still unchanged and are inherent in everyday life of the original population in Mexico.

### **In the Field**

For a number of years I have studied the local dialect of Nahuatl spoken in a village, Coatepec Costales, in the state of Guerrero in Mexico. Originally I chose that particular dialect because of its position in the general dialectological picture and because it displayed much variation apparently correlated with generation and with other social factors.

The community has some three thousand inhabitants, almost all of whom are bilingual in Nahuatl and Spanish. There are two primary schools, first to sixth grade, where only Spanish is taught; the teachers, who commute daily from the nearest town, do not speak Nahuatl. Most people under forty have attended school and can read, but only in Spanish; there are also people in their thirties who cannot even read numbers. It is primarily women who practice the ability to read, since they are responsible for a diversity of Catholic hymns and prayers, sung and said at religious rituals. And religious activities pervade the everyday life in the village.

Whenever people asked me what I was doing there, I would try to explain my interest in Nahuatl dialects and in their language in particular. But few people have accepted language in itself as a possible object of interest and study; it is a common attitude in most communities that language does not lend itself to study, but in Coatepec Costales – as well as in other Mexican villages – this attitude may be even stronger because of the lack of respect they

and their language meet among non-Indians in the nearby town and in other Mexican provinces. Even though their language, Nahuatl, is used in everyday life, they cannot imagine why anyone would study it.

My linguistic work with the dialect has been traditional in the sense that in the beginning I elicited vocabulary, constructions, and sentences with the purpose of describing the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the dialect and of having access to a lexicon. My data include texts of various kinds: stories, traditional formal speeches, conversation, etc. Less systematically I have also collected general observations by participating in the daily life in the community and by talking with people.

In addition I have studied and photographed the local craft, which is work with fibers from the maguey plant, extracting, processing, and spinning them, and finally weaving bags with them. The study of this craft I undertook because I like to observe skilled hands work, because it would give me a topic to talk with people about, and it would provide a legitimate reason for my visits that was acceptable to the people; in a broader perspective I also considered it valuable to document – both visually and in a text – a craft that has been worked, almost unchanged, for the last three thousand years; and last but not least, I wanted in that way to collect some coherent textual material, linguistic data, about a truly local topic.

The studied craft is no longer practiced by everyone the way it was some generations ago. In 1980 when I began the project, people working with maguey were older people, widows, and others who had no desire or no possibility of going to the nearby town or to the United States to earn money. This last option has been general practice among the villagers, legally or illegally according to the legislation of the US, since 1947.

### **Collecting and preparing the text**

The make-up and progression of the project was not planned in detail, but was shaped by circumstance and by the knowledge I acquired as I went along. I no longer remember when the idea of making it into a book took form.

My choice of informant was even less preplanned: in December 1983 as I walked up one of the paths in the village, I happened to see processed and cleaned maguey fibers hung up to dry in bundles on a stretch of wire in front of a house. I entered the courtyard and asked the owner of the fibres for permission to photograph the beautiful sight. Isaías Mendoza Cerón, who was the owner and the craftsman, had no objections, and I told him about my interest in their craft.

But it was not until April, when he had used all the prepared fibre I had seen that day and was ready to start from the beginning again, that I began working systematically with him.

First I asked him to describe to me in detail the whole process that goes into preparing the fibres and into producing *morrales*, the traditional carrying bags; I said he should imagine that I wanted to learn to do it or to be able to teach someone else to.

Afterwards I asked him to take me along so that I could observe, film, and photograph the numerous steps that go into the work.

Isaías Mendoza was at the time 56 years old; he turned out to be a systematic and deliberate speaker. While he was working at his back-strap loom I recorded on tape his narration about the work processes. During the previous three months I had talked with many people who were at one stage or another of the work, and asked them about their traditional craft. My knowledge about it was therefore detailed enough that I could interrupt his relation with questions when he had either skipped something or assumed that everyone knows what a *matamental* is, for example. In response to my questions he would then expand and explain in greater detail.

I returned to the house where I stayed and transcribed the recording – including my own questions – and found that there were still points he had left out, details he had missed, and passages in the text that I was uncertain about. I went back to him some days later, discussed it with him, and asked him to add and expand. When we had done this a couple of times, I did a bit of editing of the text, i.e. I chose between several almost identical paragraphs and left out a few unfinished sentences. I did not change anything or shift things around.

In later discussions with others who also work with maguey, I learned that some people differ slightly from Isaías Mendoza in the order of two or three steps in the process; in a few cases others use technical terms that are different from his, or they swap two of the terms. In agreement with Isaías Mendoza, I therefore in a few places added something like “others say ...”, or “others first do x and then y”.

I then naively attempted a discussion with Isaías Mendoza about what “orthography” to choose, but found that in this matter he had no opinion. He has had only a few years of school, is literate in Spanish, but rarely employs his literacy and for quite specific purposes: letters, ritual dance texts, and for reading the destination of buses etc. His attitude towards writing in Nahuatl is no different from that of the others in the community.

I therefore went to see the one man in the village who reads newspapers

and in general uses his literacy in daily life, Rogelio Guevara. We discussed the choice of letters; at least that was how I perceived the situation at the time, but his contribution to that discussion becomes less and less clear to me. – As in other aspects of the project, my awareness of problems and attitudes – especially by my own – has come as delayed reactions. – What I wanted to discuss was primarily the basic question of either using letters the way they function in Spanish orthography: qu and c for /k/, or choosing to ignore Spanish orthography and for example write k for /k/.

It is a fact that they have no tradition for writing Nahuatl in Coatepec Costales. There is however in Mexico a writing tradition for Nahuatl from the 16th century, introduced and created by the Spanish friars and used in that period both by friars and by Nahuatl speakers themselves; this European based tradition is reflected in an abundant and rich literature in Nahuatl. The orthography used in these texts is, with little variation, what we find in most Nahuatl documents and publications from that time and from the following centuries.

In this century we have primers from some present-day Nahuatl speaking communities, stories collected and published by anthropologists; scholars have in co-operation with individuals published biographies; and movements to preserve the traditions in writing have surged at various times. The orthography used in such modern texts varies, the traditionalist movements, for example, do not adjust their orthography to the Spanish one.

In the case of two phenomena the traditional orthography underrepresents the Nahuatl language: it does not indicate glottal stop, nor does it distinguish between long and short vowels. Most modern dialects, however, have [h] corresponding to glottal stop in the best known 16th century dialect, so in those dialects this is no longer a problem; and the orthography used in most of the texts published today still ignores the difference between long and short vowels.

In the dialect of Coatepec Costales the glottal stop, if at all present, is manifested as a glottal stop; and, burdened by my linguistic background, I could not imagine leaving it out, nor could I accept omission of vowel length.

For long vowels I suggested two possibilities to Rogelio Guevara: vowel + colon, *quilita:ia* ‘hides it’ versus double vowel, *quilitaiia*; of the two evils he found the double vowel the lesser. Again, concerning the question of representing the glottal stop, he was not overenthusiastic, but accepted an apostrophe, for example *itic in aal* ‘in(side) the water’.

I had other problems with the way of writing the dialect of Coatepec Costales: a sequence of two prefixes, *ti* ‘1. person singular, subject’ and *k* ‘3.

person singular, object *thi*, is reduced to *t* before most consonants, *tC*, and preceding *t* it is pronounced with just the slightest, almost imperceptible aspiration, *h-t*. I chose to leave that aspiration out.

Basically I thus adhered to the traditional orthography, but for the sake of linguistic accuracy both glottal stop and vowel length were indicated, and the local peculiarities were respected wherever I was aware of them.

Having made the decisions about the orthography, I typed the full text and showed it to Isaiás Mendoza who looked at it and nodded approvingly, but had no corrections or suggestions.

In an attempt to check it in practice, I asked Rogelio Guevara to read the whole text aloud, and I recorded his reading so as to be able to go over it later and spot possible places that he stumbled over or did not understand. As it turned out, he read it without problems.

Finally, I ventured to write a brief introduction to the book in the local Nahuatl dialect. Well knowing that most speakers would find it difficult to correct my language – and this reticence is only partly due to respect for my literacy, it is also due to the exceptional tolerance they harbor towards their own language (cf. UC 1993) – I went to a close friend who, in working with me, has acquired a bit of linguistic sophistication, and who would not either be too shy to correct obvious mistakes; moreover, I had discussed the project of the book with her. I read my brief introduction aloud, but was unable to get all the way through it because she began laughing after the first two sentences. What made her laugh was not the content of the text or my formulations, but the fact that I sat there reading, reading aloud to her in her own language, a situation that she found so foreign and so absolutely hilarious. I believe my good pronunciation, the naturalness and fluency added to the absurdity of the situation. It took many starts and many complete readings before she was able to focus on the actual content; she had few corrections, and when I myself suggested alternatives, we discussed them, so I trust that the introduction is acceptable as a text in the local dialect.

I translated the full text into Spanish, aiming for a close translation in local rural Spanish. To have that translation checked I took it to a Mexican archaeologist who has worked with pre-Columbian weaving techniques, and who accepted my desire to keep the Spanish in an informal style.

Out of the field and with a typewriter of my own, I now typed the pages the way I imagined them to appear in the final result: every left page with Spanish text and every right one with Nahuatl text, but only the bottom half of the pages were to have writing; the top half I reserved for illustrations. I bound these pages so that it would look more like a real book; and with this “book” and a

selection of photographs showing magney fibres at all stages of the process and Isaiás Mendoza and others working with them I returned to Coatepec Costales two years later to check some minor questions and problems. Whatever I went, I showed the material, and there were naturally many reactions to the photographs: surprise, laughter, questions and comments; but the text evoked no response. After all, it did not look much like a book, and my explanations about illustrations on every page was received without comments.

The actual production of the book took a long time; I translated the text into English, had to find someone who could do the drawings – after my photographs and films – apply for funding, which was difficult, because it was not an obviously scholarly publication, and it addressed a narrow audience.

It was finally published in June of 1993, on fine, heavy paper, with drawings on every page, nine color photographs in the back, and a photograph on the front cover and another one on the back cover. The designer who did the drawings, Nana Vested Olesen, also did the layout; the result is a thoroughly handsome book, way beyond my expectations.

### The reception of the book

Three weeks after it was published I went back to Coatepec Costales accompanied by Nana Vested Olesen and with a stack of the books to give to informants, to all those who have helped me, and to other acquaintances in the village.

People's general reactions to the book were combined surprise, pride, and delight. What struck me was the intensity and the interest with which it was studied. In no case did the first inspection take less than an hour. And the accompanying comments were “my bien explicado”, “importante porque ya se está perdiendo”, “se ve bien todo”.

Naturally, the drawings created the most immediate response, and they were scrutinized. On one of the first pages there is a drawing of a *machete grabato*, a long knife with a curved blade; the drawing is placed in the margin and shows it with the handle upwards; several persons turned the book, probably because “in real life” one usually sees a machete with the handle close to oneself, or they wanted to look at it as if they were holding it or grabbing it. In general, people were excited by that drawing of a machete, some insisted on pointing it out to bystanders.

The drawings that show a process where someone makes use of his toes to hold the magney fibres caused laughter, and people would keep turning back to those pages and giggle; likewise a drawing that illustrates how someone with her mouth sprays water on the fibres to keep them moist provoked

laughter. Due to previous experience with some people's perplexity over photographs that include only a part of something, I had worried about pictures that show, for example, hands at work, i.e. with less than a complete person; however, they led to no specific questions or surprise.

A pervading reaction was an interest in trying to identify the persons in the drawings, a constant question was, "Who is that?" Since the drawings were all based on photographs, I could name them all. However, some people were able to identify most of them themselves, by the way the hair looks, the hat, and other personal details; several people immediately identified a young man seen walking away in the last drawing, i.e. his face does not show, but his hat and his characteristic gait gave him away. A not unusual comment was something like, "Here [in the drawings] it is not so clear [who the person is], in those with color, yes." or "it shows better in those with color."

Those who are literate (in Spanish) would immediately start reading the text or spelling their way through it. From their reading it was obvious that the apostrophe for glottal stop and the double letter for long vowels – phenomena that do not exist in Spanish orthography – were obstacles; some tried to pronounce a double vowel, and they were simply briefly stopped by the apostrophe.

One person asked why I write *nt* for the sequence [nd]; the answer is that the writing I have chosen is phonemic; that way many words are spelled exactly like in the 16th century. The *d* is an allophonic variant of *t*, what in the 16th century was pronounced *nt* is now pronounced *nd*.

Later reactions – after some of them had gone through it alone – were that the many Spanish loanwords are not Nahuatl, and that some of the processes are in the wrong order, etc. From these reactions it became clear that – even though Isaías Mendoza is co-author of the book – it was perceived of as an authoritative text; I responded that that is how Isaías Mendoza talks, that everyone in Coatepec Costales uses Spanish loan words, and that was how *he* told the story.

Nana Vested Olesen had a revealing comment: if she had visited the village before doing the drawings, she would have included more dogs, turkeys and pigs in the illustrations. In other words *my* selective choice of motives is repeated in her drawings.

### Consequences

The project has led me to form an opinion about the status or meaning of a text written in their unwritten language. This opinion cannot be generalized to all such situations, but it may be valid in other Indian communities in Mexico.

People's view of the book as an authoritative text has drawn my attention to the crucial fact that what they know in written form, what they read, is something that comes from our European tradition... With the book I attempted to show my esteem for their culture. However, I have done it by lifting the oral description of their traditional craft out of its natural setting into a form of expression that belongs in my culture, and have thereby also asserted my own superiority and that of my culture.

In other words, if my aim was to missionize in reverse, to propagate the mesoamerican culture to its descendants, then the project was a mistake because I have only confirmed the attitude that permeates Mexico, namely that my culture is superior to theirs.

I have always found it natural to acknowledge the debt I owe to informants and to give them credit for their contributions. I therefore never questioned Isaías Mendoza's right to be named co-author. However, after having witnessed the reactions to the book, I now realize that in a way that was a mistake too: the oral narration was Isaías Mendoza's, granted, but in written form it was no longer his. He would never have thought of describing his work; much less write a book about it. In fact Isaías Mendoza was disappointed and uninterested when I presented him with the book in June last year; he had hoped to receive in book form a Spanish dance text which he once let me copy from a note book and which he had asked me to type for him. Such a book is of interest to him because, as mentioned above, in his culture Spanish dance texts are about the only written texts they use. The written version of his oral narration is mine. By making him co-author I give him part of the responsibility for the book, a responsibility he has never asked for, and which he is not interested in taking.

On the other hand, if I had not made it clear – by making him co-author – that the narrated text *was* his, it would have become an even more authoritative book.

Concerning the language, my work in Coatepec Costales has shown me that there is more variation in the Nahuatl dialect they speak than I had expected. I am fascinated with the amount of variation and find it a challenge to handle it linguistically. My hypothesis is that it owes its existence to the lack of a written norm and to an extreme degree of tolerance to varying forms and pronunciations.

In spite of my awareness of the wealth of variation in the dialect and of their tolerance, I insist on invariance. My expectations are invariance, so I create invariance – maybe not in the utterances provided by individual informants, but by insisting on freezing an oral narration in writing – a medium of

my culture. I plan to study a spoken language, but happen to freeze it, to make it into something else.

Linguistically I grab invariance in their language; without realizing it and without intending it I introduce a norm, I raise Isaías Mendoza's choice of words, of morphological forms, way of talking, and general style to the authoritative way of writing their Nahuatl.

The book was received positively; but it was only by finishing the project that I was able to recognize the implications – not only linguistically – of publishing a book in an unwritten language. I had promoted a standardization of the language and culture that I only wished to study.

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