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The Inca and Aztec States 1400–1800

Anthropology and History

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To
Evon Z. Vogt
and
John J. Johnson,
teachers, colleagues, friends

Nahuatl Literacy

Frances Karttunen

Editors' Introduction

Unlike Andean peoples, Nahuatl speakers of central Mexico enjoyed a precolonial tradition of writing. Karttunen charts how a convergence of anthropologists, historians, and linguists on nonstandard Nahuatl texts has revised the picture of colonial Indian life in central Mexico.

Beginning with early colonial rule and continuing up to the abolition of the Royal Court of Appeals in Mexico after independence, Indian notaries wrote Nahuatl documents for litigating property ownerships, disputes, petitions, and other legal matters. Written Nahuatl was the accepted genre for public legal discourse by Indians, even in areas outside central Mexico where Nahuatl was once observed as a lingua franca for government. Karttunen suggests that the Nahuatl legal genre was a major medium for Nahuatl speakers' acculturation, even though Nahuatl litigation preserved a certain degree of autonomy in local government. Formulating arguments that could withstand appeal up the judicial hierarchy to Mexico meant adopting Spanish legal conventions and concepts, ultimately facilitating not only linguistic but also cultural assimilation into the Spanish world. Here again, as in the chapters by Borah and Stern, indigenous cultural practices collapse in unforeseen ways through articulation with the state, rather than being imposed by policy from above.

Introduction

In the year that Columbus reached the New World, Antonio de Nebrija published the first written grammar of a vernacular language. Previously, grammars such as the ancient Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini had only been devised to preserve archaic languages of ritual and sacred significance—languages from which the vernaculars had diverged significantly. Justifying the utility of his new type of grammar to Isabella of Spain, Nebrija suggested that it could aid in governing the heathen (Nebrija 1492–1946:prologue). Soon Spain had a vast population of heathen upon which to test this assertion, and in fact Nebrija's grammar did serve the missionary friars as a model for grammars describing hitherto unwritten languages of the Americas.

In the course of describing these newly encountered languages, compiling dictionaries, and creating instructional material for the religious conversion of the new Spanish subjects, a surprisingly large number of Spaniards, at first mainly friars, acquired fluency in New World languages. Their concerns extended beyond simple evangelism to an intense interest in the cultures that lay in ruins all about them. From this concern arose the vast and detailed ethnographic works that document New World civilizations in the first quarter of the sixteenth century (Sahagún 1950–1969). Although these collections were dictated by the survivors of the conquest, they were created, glossed, and annotated under the direction of Europeans and so can be classed together with the native-language breviaries, confessional guides, didactic theatricals (Horcasitas 1974), and other such works as literature created for the interaction of Europeans and Indians. The impetus came from the Spanish side.

Beginning at the very same time, a second body of writing in Nahuatl came into being. These are documents written by native speakers for other native speakers in Spanish-based orthography. Although these documents often came to be presented before Spaniards in the course of litigation, they were created primarily for use among Nahuatl speakers. Upon contact with Europeans, a sector of the Indian population had become literate and remained literate on its own initiative so long as literacy had a functional role in indigenous communities.

There is a clear contrast between these two bodies of Nahuatl writing. The first has preserved for us what is known as "Classical Nahuatl"—the highly formal and stylized *tecpillatolli* ("lordly speech") of poetry, oration, and ritual—which was learned through long training and memorization. It also created a standard exemplified in Molina's great sixteenth-century dictionary (Molina 1571/1970) and

a whole series of grammars culminating in Carochi's comprehensive masterwork of the mid-seventeenth century (Carochi 1645). Beginning with the 1539 Nahuatl religious guide, which is believed to be the first book printed in the Americas (Horcasitas 1979:94; Schwaller 1973:69), works in Nahuatl produced from within the church have adhered to this standard with the great consistency so admired by Jorge Klor de Alva.

In contrast, the other sort of Nahuatl writing, which James Lockhart and I call "Colonial Nahuatl," appears chaotic. Spelling conventions in particular vary wildly not only across documents but within individual documents. So far as we can tell, with the possible exception of Chimalpahin, no Indian ever owned or consulted Molina's dictionary. Yet the very fact that the people who wrote Colonial Nahuatl were not constrained by a standard led them to create records of the fine details of their actual speech and hence the geographic and historical variation of Nahuatl. Through them it has been possible to document important changes in the language over the whole colonial period and the concomitant changes in the circumstances of the Indians themselves.

In the past decade or so scholars have begun to realize the full extent and potential of postconquest documentation written in Nahuatl and other Mesoamerican languages. Anthropologists, who have a long-standing tradition of association with linguists, have taken the lead in this, particularly Pedro Carrasco and Fernando Horcasitas. Insisting as they do that we must know what Indians said about themselves in their own languages within the context of their own cultures, they stand as a bridge between linguists and historians, who until recently have perceived little common ground. In this particular area, however, the interests of linguists and historians directly converge. Linguistic studies of Indian texts, showing not only what was said but how it was said, can reveal trends and patterns that run parallel to those seen in various kinds of historical research and can also throw much direct light on cultural and social history. The dialogues between historians and anthropologists, on the one hand, and between anthropologists and linguists, on the other, here become a conversation among us all.

Preconquest Precedents

In Mesoamerica and in Peru the Europeans encountered indigenous high cultures in which mathematical calculation and record keeping occupied a role of central importance, but only in Meso-

america was there anything like writing. The Maya, Mixtec, Nahuatl, and other peoples kept records carved in stone and painted on paper. The manufacture of paper was an important commercial industry; many towns lived and thrived on paper production. It also had its ceremonial aspects. Not only were records kept on paper, but paper was offered in sacrifice along with other precious things such as fine food, quetzal feathers, and human blood. The attitudes toward paper and what was recorded on it were set down soon after the conquest in considerable detail, and from this we know that the writing of things and the interpretation of what was written was an occupation of great prestige. The tradition of conventional abstract representation was protected, developed, shared, and highly regarded among the Mesoamerican peoples. The Spaniards destroyed great quantities of the paper records, but from the remaining ones and from those produced immediately after the conquest, we can tell much about how they were used and interpreted.

There is a world of difference between Mesoamerica and Peru in this respect. The Andean culture completely lacked this tradition of representation on paper. The thing generally understood to be its closest analogue was the *Khipu*, a knotted cord that could be "read" by an interpreter. Unfortunately, the details of knotting the cord and interpreting the knots have not been described in any satisfying way, and the direct relationship to linguistic phenomena (sound segments, syllables, words) is much in doubt. In Chapter 16 of this volume Zuidema presents other examples of ways in which the Andeans kept records, and these seem even less directly linguistic. Hence, in the Andes there were no precedents with which to identify European alphabetic writing, and I believe that it is as a direct result of this that so little colonial documentation in written Quechua exists.

Mesoamerican indigenous writing was a mixed system. The symbols comprised at least the following: (a) a complex and precise vigesimal number system, (b) direct pictorial representation, and (c) indirect representation of the phonetic value of individual syllables. A syllabic writing system is a significant advance over a pictorial one and prepares the way for the adoption of an alphabetic one, but there is no evidence that any Mesoamerican people had moved on to writing complex discourses in glyphs. Until the conquest, their representations were largely restricted to dates, personal names, place names, and records of events.

With respect to phonetic representation, Mesoamerican texts and inscriptions were always mixed. There is none known, no matter how brief, that is composed entirely of symbols representing individual

syllable values, although some scholars, such as Floyd Lounsbury and Linda Schele, believe the potential was always there. Amidst pictures of rabbits that really represent rabbits; hills that represent hills; and water symbols that represent springs, rivers, tears, etc., there are some other pictures that represent sound rather than content. Just as in English one could represent the pronoun *I* with a picture of an eye, so incorporated into the representation of a Nahuatl name one finds, for instance, a picture of buttocks to represent the honorific element. The stem of *buttocks* is *tzīn-*, and the honorific is a suffix *-tzīn*. The Nahuatl locative *-tlan* common to so many place names is conventionally represented by a mouthful of teeth: *tlan-*. (In the dictionary citation form *tlantli*, the *-tli* is a suffix.) In both these cases the thing pictured is homophonous with the thing intended—that is, both have the same pronunciation—and the substitution is effected because it is more easily drawn than the semantically abstract thing it represents.

Beyond this, there is some evidence that there was development in the direction of further abstraction: The drawn object represented a syllable only partially its homophone. Distinctive tone in Mayan languages might be ignored and likewise distinctive vowel length in Nahuatl. Here again there is a move to arbitrariness, from literal pictorial representation to a type of writing system.

But no Mesoamerican group had developed a full syllabary by the time of the conquest. Compared with the syllabic Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system, all Mesoamerican systems were narrowly restricted in the information they conveyed; they were pervasively pictorial. Because the messages were few (e.g., a certain person named *W* was born on date *X* at the town of *Y* and was interred at *Z*), the creator of the text or inscription could invest much ingenuity in elaborating the symbols conveying the message. Within certain conventions the artist creating glyphs sought the most subtle and artful way of expressing his message. Thus, far from informative communicative writing, Mesoamerican texts—particularly the Mayan inscriptions—stand as intricate puzzles constructed on predictable messages.

Interpretation of the painted codices depended on intensive memorization by select groups of individuals under instruction in special institutions. Literacy in preconquest Mesoamerica was not a general skill that could be internalized and used productively; transmission of the extensive bodies of hymns, poems, and chronicles was essentially oral. The prestige accruing from the creation of the written—or rather, painted—page was great, however, and this Mesoamerican attitude, together with the approach to syllabic writing already achieved, pro-

duced a ready receptivity to alphabetic writing as introduced by the Spanish friars in the second quarter of the sixteenth century.

Postconquest Developments

Although its place in Christian iconography is relatively minor, the book should be nearly as central a symbol of the church as the cross. The Europeans brought books with them and immediately began creating new ones. To expedite instruction and inquiry, they compiled dictionaries, wrote grammars, translated religious works, composed sermons, and created confessionary guides. Pictures from the mid-sixteenth century already show Indians gathered around friars in monastery atrios with books on their laps (McAndrew 1965:295, 626). Moreover, sons of noble families were brought together by the Franciscans, instructed in reading and writing along with Christian doctrine, and sent back out to preach to their people. Through direct and indirect contact with Spanish friars, writing passed into Indian hands at an early date and quickly came to live a life of its own independent of the church.

Although there are colonial documents in existence today written in Yucatecan Maya, Otomí, Mixtec, and other languages, the number of known documents in these languages is rather small. On the other hand, there is such profusion of written Nahuatl that samples are available for virtually every decade from the conquest down to the inception of Mexican independence. By the end of the first half-century of Spanish presence in Mesoamerica, every central Mexican community of any size and importance had a native notary who kept records, generally in Nahuatl. The notarial tradition was self-perpetuating at the local level; sometimes the same family would provide the notary for generations. In some communities the notary was the only person who could read and write. In others, such as Amecameca, literacy was clearly widespread (Karttunen and Lockhart 1978). But in either case, notary succeeded notary within the community through generations and centuries. Thanks to this we have texts without a break from the 1540s to the end of the colonial period. No other Indian language is so documented.

The subject matter of the notarial records is mundane, far from the metaphorical and often obscure language of the "Classical Nahuatl" tradition. It has to do with stewardship or ownership of property, settlement of disputes, petitions, and other legal matters where ambiguity was anathema. Much verbatim testimony is recorded, showing

what everyday speech was like. When Juan Vicente, *alcalde* of Jalostitlan complained of being beaten, he said the priest replied, "Yes, I beat you and splintered your staff, and I will break your whole head" (Anderson *et al.* 1976:167). Leonor Magdalena accused her daughter-in-law of following her around, beating her, and generally behaving as a *loca* (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976:105). Juan Gregorio justified his appropriation of his cousin's land on the grounds that he had irresponsibly leased it to "really stupid people" (Karttunen and Lockhart 1978:168).

Of the texts produced in great abundance by the local notaries, the number from the immediate area of Mexico-Tenochtitlan dwindles with time as the indigenous population died off or was assimilated in what had become a Spanish city. Nearby Xochimilco and Milpa Alta and many towns of the neighboring states of Morelos, Puebla, and Tlaxcala remained Indian, providing us with numerous texts whereby we can compare the details of speech of these communities at various points in the colonial period with modern Nahuatl currently spoken. Generally, Nahuatl survived best and longest in inaccessible places where contact with Spanish was minimal. But contact was nowhere absent, and these texts reflect over decades and centuries the internal adjustments Nahuatl made because of the proximity of Spanish and the translation that went on between the two languages.

Because Spanish and Nahuatl have now been in continual contact for over 400 years, there has been constant opportunity for Nahuatl speakers to return to Spanish to augment or eliminate older lexical and grammatical borrowings. As a result, modern Nahuatl is overlaid with contact phenomena of different periods. Some earlier material has been replaced or discarded, while other things remain as relics. Given only texts of modern Nahuatl, we would have a difficult task in reconstructing the sequence by which it acquired its various types of Hispanisms. The written texts of the colonial period, however, give us a view of the evolution of Nahuatl since the conquest. Happily for us, a clear picture emerges that is in accord with descriptive work done with other languages in apparently similar circumstances: Comanche, Huave, and Popoluca (Casagrande 1955; Diebold 1964; Law 1961:561).

Rarely are the effects of language contact situations so clear. This is true largely because of the unique isolation of the Americas from the rest of the world prior to the sixteenth century. We know exactly when and under what circumstances contact with Spanish began. The fact that the languages are so typologically dissimilar is very helpful. Most helpful of all are the notarial texts.

Nahuatl started with no previous experience of Spanish or any

language like it. It did exist in contact with many languages belonging to other language families. These languages had come to share many common typological features in spite of their heterogeneous ancestry. But Nahuatl shows no evidence of having had strategies for borrowing from its neighbors. Apparently the diffusion of linguistic areal features in Mesoamerica was quite ancient and widespread; it was certainly unconscious, a slow osmosis rather than a matter of daily confrontation. For a long time, too, Nahuatl had been in the position of donor, not recipient.

Comparing Nahuatl with Comanche, Huave, Popoluca, and in a very preliminary way with Yucatecan Maya, one does not find any real differences in type of response to contact with Spanish. According to the best of evidence at hand, they all moved through a set sequence of linguistic accommodations. This is also true across Nahuatl dialects, which otherwise vary among themselves to some considerable extremes due to historical and geographical separation. With respect to Spanish language contact phenomena, the diverse Nahuatl dialects are monolithic; one finds no startling deviances. What is variable is not what happened or the order in which it happened, but the rate at which it happened. Nahuatl of the central Mexican highlands moved through this set sequence much further and faster than Nahuatl spoken in remote areas, and Nahuatl as a unitary language moved through the sequence far ahead of socially and geographically more isolated languages of Mesoamerica. At mid-seventeenth century a cluster of significant steps along the scale reflects the increased pressure of daily contact, translation, and large-scale bilingualism. The abundance of documents leading to and through this period makes it possible to date a qualitative change in the nature of Nahuatl and Spanish language contact.

Figure 15.1 summarizes Spanish contact phenomena as they appear in the Nahuatl texts. It represents a certain amount of averaging and rounding off; some Nahuatl communities have been more in contact with Spanish than others, and some individuals have always been more conservative in speech than others. But the figure is based on generalizations from literally hundreds of colonial documents written by local notaries in both central and peripheral Nahuatl-speaking areas. James Lockhart and I have documented these developments at length and in detail elsewhere (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976).

The first manifestations of Nahuatl and Spanish contact have to do with Nahuatl nouns. Extension of lexical meaning was typical of Nahuatl in the earliest years after the conquest, just as it has been of other languages in similar situations. Nahuatl speakers had to find

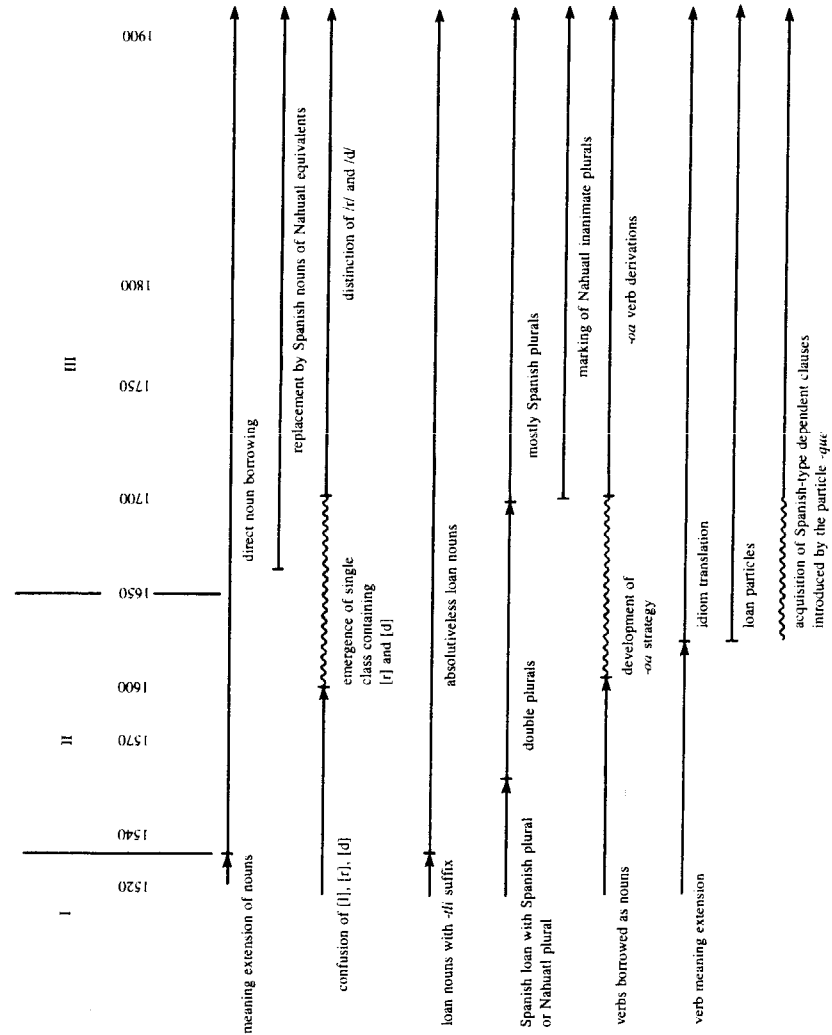


Figure 15.1 The chronology of Nahuatl contact strategies.

some way to talk about the many new things the Spaniards brought along with them, and for the most part they did so out of the resources of their own language. Nahuatl extended the sense of its word for "cotton" to "wool" and thence to "sheep," and *tepoztlī* "copper" came to mean "workable metal from which instruments are made," specifically "iron," which is its universal and exclusive sense today.

Molina's dictionary of 1571 records some of the original extensions involving *maçātlī*, "deer," for "horse" and descriptions such as "seat upon a horse" for "saddle," but these were already archaisms that had been replaced in actual usage by *caballo* and *silla* (Molina 1571/1970). Nahuatl had already moved on from using extensions, descriptions, and circumlocutions to direct noun borrowing. For nouns this change happened so quickly that by 1540 there was a substantial core of loan vocabulary of just the sort one would expect: names for introduced artifacts, plants, and animals; words for European religious, legal, and economic concepts. But not a single verb borrowed as a verb is attested for the entire sixteenth century.

The first direct noun borrowings into Nahuatl were strongly assimilated into the language, not only phonetically, as we can tell from deviant spellings, but morphologically. A handful of relic forms of the very oldest Spanish loans end in the Nahuatl absolutive suffix *-tli*: *camisatli* < *camisa* "shirt"; *cuentaxtli* < *cuenta(s)* "rosary bead"; *xayotli* < *sayo* "coat". But as the flood of loan words swelled to grand proportions, the absolutive suffix lost its productivity, and Nahuatl came to have two large noun classes: those with absolutive marking, mainly native Nahuatl nouns, and those unmarked for the absolutive, mainly—but not exclusively—Spanish loanwords.

A third effect of Spanish contact upon Nahuatl nouns in the sixteenth century was the beginning of a series of adjustments in the system of plural marking. Nahuatl differed from Spanish in that only animate nouns were overtly marked in the plural. Inanimate nouns had no special plural form. In the early period of contact, Spanish loan nouns appeared in texts with either a Spanish or a Nahuatl plural suffix rather unpredictably. Generally inanimate Spanish loan words went completely unmarked even in contexts where they were unambiguously plural, as after numbers. Then, in the latter half of the sixteenth century and on into the seventeenth century, double plurals were in use. During this period, Spanish loan nouns in the singular had their regular singular forms, while their corresponding plurals often bore both the Spanish and a Nahuatl plural suffix. Nahuatl had its own precedent for redundant plural marking in those of its animate nouns that form their plurals by reduplicating part of the stem and adding a

plural suffix for good measure: *cih-* "hare" > *cīcih-tin* "hares" In the peculiar Spanish double plurals we can see another case of Nahuatl extending some pattern of its own to intrusive new material.

Noun borrowing had some linguistic consequences for Nahuatl beyond enlarging its lexicon. It eventually brought new sound classes into the language. Although certain sound substitutions remain characteristically Nahuatl, for general purposes the confusion of [l], [r], and [d] in Spanish words was already becoming an anachronism in notarial texts by the mid-seventeenth century. Once [r] and [d] were perceived as different from [l], they went on to be differentiated from one another. When they all got sorted out, Nahuatl had gained via borrowing the distinct sound classes /r/ and /d/, which it had not had earlier.

As long as the Spanish /l/-/r/-/d/distinction remained problematic to Nahuatl speakers, along with several other major phonological distinctions, loanwords made their way into Nahuatl in often nearly unrecognizable assimilated forms (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976:Chapter 1). In fact, the whole early period of contact in the sixteenth century can be thought of as a time of assimilation to Nahuatl. Meaning extension is a sort of lexical assimilation, where Spanish concepts were fit into existing vocabulary. Then there is the phonetic assimilation. Spanish words were heard and borrowed in terms of Nahuatl phonology. Finally, the early extension of the *-tli* absolutive suffix and the use of redundant double plural marking for Spanish animate loan nouns and no marking at all for inanimate loan nouns can be thought of as a type of morphological assimilation. In the beginning Spanish was fit to the Procrustean bed of Nahuatl linguistic structure.

After the great switch to direct noun borrowing with its attendant consequences, Nahuatl entered a relatively stable period that lasted until the mid-seventeenth century. Then a cluster of new developments marks some change in Nahuatl/Spanish contact.

As more and more aspects of Spanish culture found their way into the Indian world, direct intercultural noun borrowing continued. From this point on, however, the process became more than just augmentative. After 1650, Spanish loan nouns began replacing Nahuatl equivalents for blood relations, cardinal directions, and other basic vocabulary. The double plurals fell from use, and henceforth Spanish loan nouns more often than not appeared with their simple Spanish plural suffixes. The animate/inanimate distinction for plural marking was relaxed and extended even to native vocabulary, so that trees and houses as well as rabbits and grandparents were overtly pluralized (Karttunen 1978).

Although extension of meaning came to a near halt very early for Nahuatl nouns, it had continued on into the seventeenth century for verbs. The first strategies Nahuatl developed for borrowing verbs were (a) to derive Nahuatl verbs from Spanish nouns, and (b) to treat the Spanish infinitive as a noun. At about the time that Nahuatl was developing a distinct phonological class /r/, Spanish verbs finally began to be borrowed as verbs by attaching the suffix *-oa* to the Spanish infinitive, which ends in /r/. (This relative lateness and overall lower frequency of verb borrowing when compared with noun borrowing is typical of all well-documented language contact situations).

By the time the *-oa* convention was developed, some Nahuatl verbs had attained equivalence with certain high-frequency basic Spanish verbs by meaning extension; these remained in use, continuing on in both their original literal meanings and their new Spanish-equivalent meanings. These include equivalents for *tener*, *deber*, *pasar*, *paracer*, and *faltar*—verbs that have highly idiomatic uses in Spanish. As soon as the Nahuatl verb had been extended to equivalence with the literal meaning of the Spanish verb, it began to appear in Nahuatl translations of the full range of Spanish idioms, often replacing native Nahuatl grammatical constructions. This process is well attested for *tener* and *deber* equivalents in the eighteenth century (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976:43–48). The other equivalences and idiom translations so characteristic of modern texts may also date from that time.

Again, at about the same time as double plurals were being abandoned, the /r/ and /d/ distinction was being made, the *-oa* convention for verbs was developing, and idiom translation was getting underway, Spanish particles such as *hasta*, *como*, and *mientras* began to appear regularly in Nahuatl. Generally this type of uninflected function word (as opposed to content words such as nouns and verbs) is resistant to borrowing, and a linguist would expect even more resistance when the languages involved are as typologically dissimilar as Spanish and Nahuatl, since Spanish has these particles as prepositions and clause introductory particles, while Nahuatl has its closest equivalents in postpositions bound by possessive prefixes. Yet what we find is that Nahuatl borrowed particles unlike its own from Spanish while retaining Nahuatl particles where there is a strong Nahuatl/Spanish equivalence. There was nothing like Spanish *hasta* in Nahuatl, and the particle was borrowed early, appearing with high frequency ever since. On the other hand, Nahuatl *īpampa* has almost the same semantic range as *porque*, and we have yet to find a single example of *porque* in colonial texts, although it occurs in modern Nahuatl. This parallels and is roughly simultaneous with the two stages of noun borrowing:

earlier borrowing of the new and different and later replacement of native vocabulary.

Finally, there is the emergence of Spanish-modeled dependent clauses introduced by *que* (or sometimes by its back translations *tle* and *inīn*). The use of *que* as a relative pronoun and as a clause complementizer in Nahuatl followed on the heels of particle borrowing. Although this addition to the fundamental syntactic machinery of Nahuatl is difficult to date from its inception, it is characteristic of Nahuatl as it is spoken today.

Thus, there have been two great breakthroughs in Nahuatl's long relationship with Spanish. The first came by the second half of the sixteenth century when Nahuatl began borrowing Spanish nouns directly, quickly leaving behind the stage in which a breaker and trainer of horses was called a *macāmachtiāni* "deer master." Many Native American languages stayed with this first stage much longer, and some are still there today. For Nahuatl speakers the brevity of the first period was due to the intrusion of large numbers of Spaniards into central Mexico and the daily confrontation and interaction with them. Furthermore, in spite of epidemics and depopulation, Nahuatl speakers continued to outnumber Spaniards for a long time, so that the indigenous language was maintained rather than quickly obliterated. Had the missionary friars succeeded in separating Indians and Spaniards in respective communities, the next stage would have been a long time in coming.

The second breakthrough came in the seventeenth century, mainly in the latter half, when a convention for borrowing Spanish verbs developed, idiom translation was underway, Spanish nouns began replacing Nahuatl fundamental vocabulary, and Spanish particles began to appear with high frequency and to bring significant syntactic change in tow. By the first decade or so of the eighteenth century Nahuatl was capable of absorbing and expressing succinctly anything Spanish had to offer. This acceleration in accommodation to Spanish strongly suggests that at this point, and not earlier, there was widespread bilingualism and nontraumatic daily contact between Indians and Europeans.

In no way should this change from strong assimilation of Spanish into Nahuatl to structural accommodation by Nahuatl—together with the leaving behind of certain preconquest trappings and styles—be equated with deterioration of the indigenous language. On the contrary, this process of keeping up with the times shows the vitality and flexibility of the language. Colonial Nahuatl of the eighteenth century is fine high Nahuatl; its characteristic overall linguistic structure is intact and supplemented by the best and most useful that Spanish had

to offer. Nor did Nahuatl become moribund toward the end of the colonial period. Although, as we shall see, the tradition of Nahuatl literacy was lost during the nineteenth century, the language went on being spoken and continues today. From a linguistic point of view, modern spoken Nahuatl resembles sixteenth-century Nahuatl more than it differs, and the danger to it has not been from internal decay but from the decision on the part of communities and individuals to let Nahuatl go in favor of Spanish.

The Implications of Nahuatl Literacy

A characteristic of postconquest Indian writing is the complexity of the context in which it is embedded. The choice of one language and mode of literacy rather than another at the start of the colonial period, and the role of that language once chosen, depended on the distribution of ethnicities and sociopolitical entities throughout Mesoamerica. Preconquest writing systems were an indispensable precedent for postconquest literacy, and the strands of their influence can be traced far into the colonial period.

Although the Spaniards had, in principle, uniform intentions toward all their new subjects—to reveal to them the errors of their pagan ways and to lead them into the true faith as perceived by the Roman Church—their successes were uneven to say the least. In addition to the fact that some indigenous languages were more unwritten than others, living patterns and socioeconomic organization were also important. The sedentary agricultural people of the New World, who had their own hierarchical government with trade and tribute systems, were easier to take over than small, mobile hunting groups that could never be pinned down and controlled. Because of the characteristic community pattern of Nahuatl speakers and because of the historical events just prior to the conquest, it was inevitable that Nahuatl should be the principal intermediary language between the Europeans and the peoples of Mesoamerica.

Consider the context. Traditionally, Nahuatl has also gone by the names Mexican and Aztec. If one strictly equates the Aztecs with the Mexica, then neither of these alternative names is accurate. Nahuatl was dominant at the time of the conquest not only or even principally because of the vast sphere of Mexica influence that extended itself at that time from their midlake city. The Mexica did not rule an empire in the sense we know. Nowhere were there frontiers that encircled solidly Mexica territories. On the contrary, throughout central Mexico

were cities and towns, large and small, which were distinct from the Mexica, often independent of them, and in some cases their mortal enemies. Yet the people of these communities—Texcocans, Tlaxcalans, Cholulans, Tlahuica, and countless others—spoke the same language. Moreover, the legendary predecessors of the Mexica, those Toltecs whose high culture they idealized, almost certainly were historically speakers of a variety of Nahuatl, and the wild and barbarous Chichimecs to the north, of whom the Mexica had been one group, spoke related Aztec languages. Quite probably this linguistic unity was one important factor that made it possible for one group after another to rise to prominence. Due to the preconquest mobility of groups of people in Mesoamerica and to the degree of mutual intelligibility of Nahuatl dialects, there was widespread diffusion of material culture and vocabulary, which was not linked to conquest and imposition.

With all its varieties taken together, Nahuatl was still just one language among many; it coexisted with Mixtec, Zapotec, Tarascan, Popoluca, Otomí, and several Mayan languages. But in the century or so before European contact, Nahuatl had become the prestige language, used as a *lingua franca* among speakers of these other languages and reflected in place names and inscriptions.

Examining detailed maps of Mesoamerica, one notes that even in some Maya areas the place names are almost exclusively Nahuatl. This does not necessarily mean that they were occupied by speakers of the language. Apparently these places had (and many still have) names in the local indigenous language as well as names they acquired from Nahuatl-speaking people. But the Spaniards became proficient in Nahuatl before they mastered other languages. For this reason the Nahuatl name became the official postconquest name, so registered not by the locals or even necessarily by Nahuatl speakers, but by the Spaniards. The universality of this is one measure of the prevalence and prestige of Nahuatl in Mesoamerica, but it says less than one might think about demography and politics.

The Toluca valley immediately to the west of the Valley of Mexico is a case in point. Until just a short time before the conquest it was an Otomanguan valley; its residents spoke Otomanguan languages such as Otomí, Matlazinca, and Mazahua. But from the colonial period we have not only masses of documentation in Nahuatl but Nahuatl church inscriptions, which are a great rarity. One would form the impression that Toluca was a Nahua bastion. Yet today the surviving Nahuatl-speaking communities are relatively few among the valley's many Otomí, Matlazinca, and Mazahua communities. What this sure-

ly means is that Toluca was and has remained inhabited by the same stock of Otomanguan speakers. Conquest by the Mexica brought to Toluca a relatively small proportion of high-prestige Nahuatl speakers who had primary contact with the succeeding conquerors, the Spanish. The Nahuatl speakers, not the local indigenous group, had the predisposition to literacy as well as the organization and the social standing that made it possible for them to function within Spanish conventions and turn them to their own purposes. These very advantages brought about the total assimilation of the Nahuas into the Spanish world and left behind the great Otomanguan lake barely ruffled by the wind of conquest.

Although the voluminous Nahuatl documentation from the Toluca valley is a legacy of Mexica expansionism, one cannot narrowly identify Nahuatl with the Mexica, that group of Nahuatl speakers who happened to be dominant when Cortés arrived. There were Nahuatl speakers who were the enemies of the Mexica, Nahuatl speakers subjugated to the Mexica, and quite possibly Nahuatl speakers who had never heard of the Mexica. The emergence of Nahuatl as the primary indigenous language of postconquest use in interaction with the Spanish was significant for all Nahuatl speakers, not just that group dominating political and economic structures in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. The adoption of their language for legal and clerical purposes put other Nahuatl speakers on an equal footing with the Mexica.

The unity of the Nahuatl language in some sense transcended ephemeral political organization. This is not to deny the intense local chauvinism of indigenous groups or to ignore the claims that Nahuatl speakers make about the unintelligibility of their neighbors' dialects. But when there has been a pressing need, Nahuatl speakers have been able to understand other Nahuatl speakers and to make themselves understood by them in a way they have not been able to with speakers or entirely separate languages—for example, Otomí speakers or Huastec speakers—without resort to full-scale bilingualism. Thus, the colonial legal documentation had a function that kept it viable all over Mexico, not just within the remains of Mexica structures. Records were kept in Nahuatl because in case of litigation they could be sent all the way to Mexico City if necessary, and they would be understood and respected as valid evidence even if they came from faraway Chiapas and were in such a deviant Nahuatl that at first it strikes the reader as a pidgin (Anderson *et al.* 1976:190–195). In some cases there are hints that testimony recorded in Nahuatl was in fact taken from witnesses whose language was something else, Nahuatl rather than Spanish serv-

ing as the language of documentation (Anderson *et al.* 1976:166, note). Moreover, quite aside from the potential of appeal to Spanish courts, Nahuatl-language documentation functioned within the community, being constantly presented and consulted in local dealings.

For Nahuatl speakers of the colonial period a major consequence of Nahuatl literacy was that they could and did make vigorous use of colonial Mexican courts. Though the legal system may have been at times slow, inefficient, corrupt, and partial (and there is plenty of evidence of bare-faced lying on all sides), still it settled disputes among Indians, among Spaniards, and between the two. It was by no means a hopeless, impenetrable snarl to Nahuatl speakers; had it been, no one would have patronized the notaries. The courts gave satisfaction often enough to keep everyone in business.

Adopting legal conventions, the Nahuatl of the notaries continued for a long time to evolve in its own terms, enriching itself by drawing on Spanish without at all deteriorating or being corrupted. A fine example of excellent colonial Nahuatl is the record of suit and counter-suit filed by two cousins in Amecameca in 1746. All the Spanish legal formulas are turned to Nahuatl use. Notaries are called in to identify a deceased colleague's handwriting, and there is verbatim testimony by witnesses in blunt, colloquial language. The proceedings were carried out by and for Nahuatl speakers in the total absence of Spaniards (Karttunen and Lockhart 1978).

The Amecameca suit illustrates the high degree of autonomy achieved at the local level. The whole matter was handled within the Indian community; the investigation was carried out in Nahuatl, and the court record was made by one of several resident Nahuatl-speaking notaries. There is no evidence of any translation being made or any Spaniard consulted. In the face of such total competence, Indian communities were left to look after themselves, and in the absence of outside interference, indigenous structures survived and functioned throughout the colonial period.

Literacy not only made it possible for Nahuatl speakers to manage their own affairs with a degree of autonomy during the colonial period, it also served as a vehicle to carry forward indigenous genres of literature. Over the whole postconquest period the genres of attested Nahuatl writing are the following: the *huehuetlatolli* (maxims for proper deportment, literally "words of the elders"), songs/poems, histories and annals, *padrones* (census and tribute records), correspondence, and the whole range of legal documentation (from the elegant formalities of the Amecameca document to such pieces of naivete as the founding legends exemplified in Chapter 14 in this volume). All of

these to some degree carry on preconquest precedents. In the case of what is known as Classical Nahuatl, they are the only surviving artifacts of a complex oral tradition that was virtually destroyed in the sixteenth century.

There are a number of different collections of *huehuetlatolli*, much alike in content but sufficiently different in detail to make it clear that they form a genre and are not from a single canonical body of maxims. All are quite early, the latest perhaps being the one preserved at the Bancroft Library and dating from the first half of the seventeenth century (Garibay 1943:31–53, 1943:81–107).

The great songs or poems of the high Aztec culture continued to be composed for a brief time after the conquest. In some cases they were altered to serve the Christian faith. Other songs record the events of the conquest. Many mention Cortés. The tradition, if not the formal style, lives on even today in the *relaciones* that accompany dance dramas performed by Indians throughout Mexico. Although these dialogues are primarily transmitted orally, they have also been redacted from time to time over centuries, and written versions are carefully preserved and guarded locally.

As for those poems created within the canons of postconquest convention, the two major collections—the mss. *Cantares mexicanos* and *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*—contain enough patent copyist's errors to prove beyond doubt that they were drawn from other written sources in the sixteenth century (Karttunen and Lockhart 1980). These poems appear to be the most personal expressions of human concerns to be found in written Nahuatl. As Miguel León-Portilla so lucidly sets forth (León-Portilla 1974), they come to terms with fundamental questions of intellect versus myth, the transitory nature of mortal existence, and the enigma of death. But taken in the context of the whole body of Classical Nahuatl poetry, what seem like highly personal and suggestive lyric poems turn out to be particularly felicitous concatenations of stock Nahuatl poetic building blocks to be found repeated over and over again in less profound poems. Postconquest literacy had no role in creating these poems, only in preserving them at the brink of the destruction of classical oral tradition. Their survival into colonial times was as brief as that of the *huehuetlatolli*.

In the histories and annals, which range from the most elevated to the most humble, we see a continuation of Mesoamerican record keeping. From this genre proceeded the great histories such as that of Chimalpahin, but in the colonial period it also provided a context for personal observation as in the almost chatty annals of Juan Bautista

and the gripping descriptions of events in the annals of Puebla, where the writer says that a pirate attack on Veracruz was the most disturbing local event since the coming of the Faith (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976:112–116).

The *padrones* are the quintessence of record keeping. Here was a merging of parallel European and Mesoamerican procedures from which we can learn in detail the constituencies of Nahua communities and individual households. But as the separation of European and Indian communities deteriorated and matters grew ambiguous, *padrones*, too, generally ceased to be created.

The scope of correspondence is surprisingly limited. Relatively little of a personal nature has been found aside from some letters between members of the Moteuczoma family, and even these are mainly business letters. Other letters are between towns and high officials or from one town council to another (see the appended sample business letter).

The legal documentation was the single most vital genre of written Nahuatl. Because of its purposefulness, it survived the other genres to the end of the colonial period.

There was an evolution in the physical appearance of Nahuatl documents as well as in their language and subject matter. The pictorial tradition continued on for many generations in illustrated tribute lists and conventionalized maps. The little footprints, which in the great codices show the wanderings of ancestral groups, trudge on through colonial boundary descriptions and house plans. Quantities of pesos appear as circles, and the installation and deaths of bishops are signified with mitres. Even annals of the eighteenth century were illustrated: those of Tlaxcalla with elaborate year signs—an elegant rabbit every fourth year quite overwhelming the text beside it—and those of Puebla with a rat, a smoking volcano, a dead king, and more to mark various calamities.

Early in the colonial period there began a reversal of the relative weight of the pictorial and textual components. In the mid-sixteenth-century Codex Osuna, the council of Mexico City expresses its complaints primarily through graphic means: pictures of individuals and buildings, numbers in the preconquest notation, and stylized drawings of items delivered. In some cases a whole page of pictorial material has only a few written Nahuatl words to accompany it, and they for the most part give no additional information. Yet long before the end of the century such documents were becoming rarer, and similar complaints were expressed entirely in written Nahuatl. Gradually over the colonial period there is a diminution of the preconquest elements; finally

annals were no longer kept, lists ceased to be illustrated, and maps and plans adopted the developing European conventions.

A danger to Nahuatl inherent in such proficiency with Spanish conventions was total assimilation into the Spanish world, as happened fairly early in what had been Tenochtitlan and as in the case of the Toluca Nahuatl speakers mentioned earlier. Paradoxically, as individuals and communities become more and more adept at moving back and forth between the Spanish language-and-culture complex and their own, establishing equivalences between them, they have less and less pressing need for Nahuatl; it has been and remains easier to let Nahuatl go than to maintain it. The continuing process is well documented for modern Nahuatl-speaking communities today (Hill and Hill 1978, 1979). Internal social change, rather than the endlessly shifting official policy on indigenous language maintenance so thoroughly documented by Shirley Brice Heath (1972), has determined the fortunes of Nahuatl over the years.

Language loss did not wipe out Nahuatl during the colonial period, although it skimmed off the wellborn and the city dwellers. In predominantly Indian communities it has lived on until today. A condition for language loss is a period of bilingualism, however brief, during which dominance switches from one language to the other. Another condition is a genuine possibility of assimilation. Even into this century Nahua communities have had many monolingual Nahuatl speakers. Although their language has been greatly influenced by Spanish, much or even all the Spanish influence has been secondhand. Only in the last few generations has Spanish contact been so pervasive and opportunities in the Spanish-speaking world sufficiently within reach that whole Nahua communities have become generationally bilingual and the children have switched to Spanish dominance. Now language loss really is upon them. In a nonthreatening situation where all the social and economic benefits are to be reaped through Spanish and where virtually no one in the local community must perforce communicate with another exclusively in Nahuatl, there is no longer motivation for young children to master the language of their grandparents. Insofar as the lot of Nahuatl speakers today is the common lot of all Mexicans, their language itself serves no pressing vital purpose in modern Mexico.

The tradition of literacy died much earlier and of the same causes. In fact it died with the colonial period. The danger to written Nahuatl was its concentration in the hands of professionals. Literacy continued as a specialty, as it had been with the painted codices of preconquest times. In the Nahua world written language had a public rather than a

personal function, and that function did not really evolve into anything different and more European. There was no tradition of reading and writing for personal expression and for pleasure as in the European world. People did not carry on private correspondence, and books were not common personal property. There is no definite evidence that prior to the twentieth century any woman was ever literate in Nahuatl.

To be written down in Nahuatl a matter had to be pragmatic; more than any of the other types of Nahuatl writing, legal documentation met that criterion. Toward the end of the colonial period, however, gradual internal change at the local level had placed on the town councils people who spoke Spanish as well as or better than Nahuatl. By the time Mexico gained its independence and the Royal Court of Appeals in Mexico City went out of existence, notarial Nahuatl ceased to be genuinely and immediately useful. Depending on their individual skills, the notaries switched to Spanish (Lockhart 1980) or went out of business and took virtually the entire Nahuatl writing tradition with them. After three centuries Nahuatl ceased to be a written language. Efforts since then to restore it have met with no lasting success. This is hardly surprising, since no new function for written Nahuatl has arisen that is broadly meaningful within the specifically Nahua culture.

Appendix

This is a letter from a set of early seventeenth-century Coyoacan papers in an unclassified bundle in the Archivo General de Notarías, Mexico City. A group of officials of one subtown wrote to another requesting aid in meeting their obligations. The first section of the letter is typical of the elaborate traditional greetings exchanged among Nahuatl speakers. Although the content is Christian, the style is indigenous. After the relatively long salutation, the matter at hand is stated succinctly and the letter brought to a close. Notice the italicized Spanish loan words.

Ma tt° dios amechmochicahuilitzino yn amehuatitzin yn cenca mahuiztililoni Yn onpa tochantzinco tenanitla quen amechmoyetztilitica yn tt° dios Cuix achitzin qualli cuix noço amo cuix ceme cocoliztli amotetzinco oquimotlalili yn dios cuix noço amo como huel toconmati auh yntla achitzin qualli ma yc tictotlatlauhtilica yn tt° dios—amen—ett^a
 auh ca nican catqui yc tocōtlacahuilohua yn tix in toyollo yn amotechcopatzinco totech ohuetztico Palançotequitl techitlanilia peras yhuā albarcoques auh yn axca cuix huel tihuelitizque cana ome tocenatzin peras tlachcuil tepitzitzin yhuan ma-cuilli albarcoquez yntla tihuelitizque ma cēca tocnopiltiz tomacehualtiz yn amotepalehuiliz tetlaçotlalitzin ca yn iquac quenmania yntla itla amotetzinco

monequiz ca no totlapalehuizque ca ye ixquich yn āquimocaquitia ma tt° dios amechmochicahuilitzino onpa tiquitlani tepixqui yhuā ome tlamama conitqui tamauh axca otilacuiloque *viernes*

Cenca tamechontotlaçotilia
pablo thaniel *Regidor* p° hernandez *alhuacil maior*
ju° de la Cruz *rejidor*

On the outside of the letter is written:

quimotilizque amatzintli y cenca mahuiztililoni señores matheotzin yhuā yehuatzin thomas de aquinotzi yn onpa tochantzinco tenanitla S. jacinto

Most esteemed sirs, may our Lord God give you health. How is the Lord God causing you to fare there at our home of Tenanitla? Are things at all good or not so good? Has God brought down sickness upon you or not? We can't know, but we pray to our Lord God that you should be a bit well. Amen. Etc.

And here is why we invoke your compassionate aid. The palace duty has fallen to us. They are demanding pears and apricots of us, but right now we can come up with only two dozen miserable little pears and five apricots. If we could, we would be very much indebted to your generosity, and if you are ever in need, we will aid you too. This is all we have to inform you of. May our Lord God give you health. We are requesting there a ward chief and two bearers to carry it. We have written today, Friday.

With great affection for you,

Pablo Daniel, regidor Pedro Hernandez, alguacil mayor
Juan de la Cruz, regidor

The most esteemed gentlemen Mateo and Thomas de Aquinas are to see this letter there in our home of Tenanitla San Jacinto.

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