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Nahuatl Language Change and Shift: bridging diachronic and synchronic perspectives

Nahuatl, belonging to the Uto-Aztecan family, has been spoken in Mexico at least since the first millennium A.D. It became the dominant language of the Aztec empire, a *lingua franca* throughout Mesoamerica, and the language of Spanish Christianization and administration. Although the official estimation of the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI 2010) cites a population of 1,544,968 native speakers of Nahuatl, in the vast majority of Nahua communities, intergenerational language transmission has drastically slowed or ceased completely during the last several decades, making Nahuatl a highly endangered language. Historical and modern background includes a multitude of complex sociological, political and cultural factors, both internal (strategies of survival and welfare, response to national and global trends, attitudes toward cultural heritage) and external (national policies, racist attitudes, discrimination, educational system).

As I will show in this paper, relying on extensive corpus of historical and ethnolinguistic data associated with colonial Nahuatl and present speech communities from both strongly urbanized (Puebla-Tlaxcala) and more peripheral rural communities (Huastecan region in northern Veracruz), an essential aspect of the process of language endangerment in some of the variants most affected by contact-induced language change, can be described as profound and accelerating linguistic disintegration. A crucial problem in the reconstruction of Nahuatl-Spanish contact has been differentiation between phenomena of balanced, long-term language contact documented in historical sources and those associated with unbalanced contact and language ‘decay’ in present Nahua communities. The beginning of this process leading to an accelerated language shift in specific communities (such as those in Tlaxcala) can be traced back at least several decades; in others (such as in eastern Huasteca), it is just incipient. On the basis of extensive fieldwork and linguistic documentation I identify ‘semi-speakers’ and ‘rusty speakers’ as agents of this accelerated language change leading to individual attrition. I illustrate this point by documenting specific linguistic simplification processes at the levels of lexicon, morphosyntax and phonology, with a focus on such phenomena as decreasing lexical richness, semantic simplification, relexification, disappearance of word-formation and derivational mechanisms, loss of word order conventions and fixed syntactic rules, and change in the polysynthetic typological profile of Nahuatl. In the material studied, code mixing seems to be an important phenomenon accelerating relexification and possibly other aspects of language change. An indispensable contrastive sample for this analysis is an extensive corpus of colonial documentation spanning several centuries as well as linguistic documentation of highly proficient speakers of the variants studied. As I will also show, in the sociolinguistic context, this restricted use of the heritage language has a feedback effect on the speaker's evaluation and additionally contributes to the development of a negative attitude towards the language in the native communities themselves.