

The Politics and Semiotics of Sounds – Mayan Linguistics and Nation-Building in Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of Mayan linguistics as an authoritative field of knowledge in Guatemala. In particular, it links missionary linguists' and Maya linguists' activities with shifting nationalist agendas from the 1920s to the late 1980s. It is argued that during the historical and intellectual moment that linguistics becomes an authoritative epistemology, phonetic analysis functions as a creative index that constitutes »expert« knowledge for particular semiotic and ideological reasons tied to competing versions of the Guatemalan imagined community.

Key words: Guatemala, Maya, missionary linguistics, semiotics

Introduction

In this paper, I wish to take up the question of the emergence and transformation of linguistic analysis as an authoritative field of knowledge in the context of nation-building and nationalist agendas in Guatemala from the 1920s to the mid 1980s. I aim to elucidate the relationships between linguistic analysis, the social actors who are recognized as the »legitimate« purveyors of such knowledge, and the ways in which traditional epistemological distinctions between »an-

alysts« and »native speakers« central to American linguistic anthropology are challenged by the politics of linguistics in Guatemala. I argue that during the moment that linguistics becomes an authoritative epistemology, phonetic analysis functions as a creative index that constitutes »expert knowledge« for particular semiotic and ideological reasons that are tied to competing versions of the Guatemalan imagined community.

SIL Arrives: Linguistics and Missionization

The history of contemporary linguistic analysis of Mayan languages in Guatemala in the twentieth century may very well begin with an account of the work of Cameron Townsend, the founder of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), also known as the Wycliffe Bible Translators, in the early 1920s. Townsend began his career in Guatemala in 1919 as an ambulatory Bible vendor turned proselytizer among Kaqchikel speakers in highland communities. After completing the first 20th century grammar of Kaqchikel in 1926,* Townsend turned his attention toward building SIL linguistics and evangelization in Guatemala. The explicit purpose of SIL linguistic analysis was to enable non-Mayas, particularly U.S. missionaries, to learn Mayan languages efficiently, in order to spread Spanish and Christianity among indigenous Maya populations. These goals were well suited with the Guatemalan state's efforts to eradicate linguistic and cultural differences between »Indians« and »non-Indians« in light of the process of nation-building already under way. The first definite signs of a strong link between linguistic analysis and an interested version of nation-building appeared in the Guatemalan government's support of SIL expertise in the analysis of Mayan languages. This link between politics and linguistics, which characterized the type of linguistics that dominated the intellectual scene from the 1920s until the mid 1950s, came to be challenged eventually and gradually by »native speakers« of Mayan languages.

The earliest challenge was issued by the work of two Maya groups formed in

1945, which offered an alternative manner of linking together linguistic analysis and politics. The *Convención de Maestros Indígenas* (Convention of Indigenous Teachers) and *Academia de la Lengua Maya Ki-ché* (ALMK) stressed Maya participation in linguistic analysis and implicated linguistics with other political struggles associated with the maintenance of Mayan languages. Nevertheless, it would take a few decades until Maya linguists could develop themselves into a truly oppositional force that would contest the direction of linguistics. As we will see, it was not until the 1970s that linguistic analysis became a site of struggle by two competing forces that mobilized it toward two distinct ends—linguistic assimilation and language revitalization.

Near the end of the 1950s, linguistic analysis underwent a major shift under the direction of SIL and the state's continued endorsement of it as the authoritative voice of linguistics. In the *Primer Congreso de Lingüística* (First Linguistic Congress), held in 1949 and sponsored by the Ministry of Education, particular aspects of Mayan languages' grammar became subject to extensive investigation, and SIL experts focused directly on the analysis of phonetics and phonology of Mam, Popti', Chuj, Q'anjob'al, Awakateko, Poqomam, Q'eqchi', Poqomchi', Chor-ti', K'iche' Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil¹. With an explicit focus on Mayan languages' sound systems and ways to represent them in written form, with sounds becoming regimented through vigorous analysis, the field of linguistics became discussed for the first time explicitly as a scientific field. Indeed, SIL experts participating in the Congress invoked the »objective science of linguistics« as the le-

* Townsend used his Cakchiquel Grammar as the basis for training other Christian linguistic students/missionaries for missionary work among Native Americans during the summers of 1934 and 1935 when he officially formed the SIL. It was eventually published by SIL in 1961.

gitimating force behind their new representations of sounds.

The claims by SIL analysts to science notwithstanding, linguistic analysis at the Congress and later on does undergo a much more vigorous endeavor than before. Unlike much of the earlier linguistic work done by Townsend and other linguists/missionaries, technical discourse and disciplinary practices of linguistics in the Congress and the following years are fully instantiated in representations of Kaqchikel phonetics, phonology, and orthography written by SIL linguists and officialized in the presidential accord on August 3, 1950. For example, pronunciations of sounds are now explained vis-a-vis their place and manner of articulation, as in »the /k/ represents the stop of a post-palatal sound«². Also phonological rules are written for the first time, such as the rule that »the /r/ at the end of the word is retroflexive«². Lists of individual sounds are provided in »word initial,« »word intermediate,« and »word final« position, as in »/m/ *muxu'x* (belly button), *imul* (rabbit) and *imam* (grandchild)«². These new textual practices, which are seemingly performing value-free scientific descriptions of Kaqchikel sounds, lend authority to the SIL/IIN's particular orthographic representations. The authors of IIN explicitly frame their linguistic analysis in the following way: »This Institute also wants to make clear that we have conformed, wherever possible, to the science of linguistics«².

The new »scientific turn« taken by the field of linguistics relegated Mayan linguistic analysts, and their more overtly political orientation, to a marginal position. This was particularly evident in the constitution of participants in the Congress, where the majority of »expert« participants were Ladinos and foreign lin-

guists associated with the SIL. Even though Mayas were invited to participate, they served no official function and were generally confined to the role of native »informants.«* Interestingly enough, claims by SIL to be representing the sounds of Mayan languages objectively could only be sustained by the native speakers in the conference. It is some aspects of this complex relationship between linguistic experts and native speakers that I turn to address next.

Fixating on Phonetics: The Politics and Semiotics of Sounds

That the phonetics of Mayan languages became the focus of analysis when linguistics took an overtly »scientific« turn is not fortuitous. The reasons are both political and semiotic. They are political in that the analysis and representation of sound systems can play a central role in the formation of national identity. Indeed, the regimentation of phonetics enables the development of standardized orthographies that, in turn, facilitate the proliferation of textual materials for vernacular literacy as part of national identity formulation. As Schieffelin and Doucet³ have illustrated with Haiti, the consolidation of national identities in post-colonial contexts is often predicated upon regimenting sound systems for the production of a unified orthography that facilitates textual and social processes necessary, as Anderson⁴ argues, for nations to be imagined.

In addition to this political explanation, there are also semiotic reasons that can explain why the scientific turn in linguistics coincided with the advent of phonetic analysis. Indeed, the focus of SIL linguists on phonetic analysis provided for them, I argue, a creative index of »ex-

* Seven Mayas who had professional positions in the IIN also attended.

pert knowledge« because phonetics, as the smallest meaningful unit of human language, is taken to be the least likely aspect of grammatical systems to be accessible to »native speaker« awareness. In other words, phonetic analysis sustains claims to a scientific enterprise by means of an ostensibly justifiable division between expert linguists and native speakers. This particular orientation toward meaningful units of sound, as comprising a site that is inaccessible to native speakers' awareness, is grounded in much of contemporary linguistic anthropology inherited, in part, from the pioneering work of Whorf. More recently, Silverstein⁵ makes the following argument in »Limits of Awareness«:

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make a native speaker take account of those readily-discernible facts of speech as action that (s)he has no ability to describe for us in his or her own language.

Building upon Whorf's work, Silverstein argues that the degree to which native speakers are able to articulate accurately metalinguistic (specifically meta-pragmatic) knowledge of their language(s) depends upon the semiotic properties of unavoidable referentiality, continuous segmentability, and relative presuppositional quality vis-à-vis the context of usage⁵. In all three cases, Silverstein finds the exception that proves the rule in the sounds of human speech. For instance, he contrasts the T/V deference vs. solidarity system as unavoidably referential with

such pragmatic alternations as certain North American English phonetic markers of social stratification isolated by Labov in many famous studies, where the signals of socio-economic class affiliation of the speaker reside in subtle pronuncia-

tion effects within certain phonetic categories, which operate independent of any segmentation of speech by the criterion of reference⁵.

Silverstein concludes his discussion about the limits of native speaker awareness, by contrasting surface lexical forms with sounds and other non segmentable aspects of structure:

The further we get from these kinds of functional elements of language, the less we can guarantee awareness on the part of the native speakers. Hence for the rest, the more we have to depend upon cross-cultural analysis and the accumulated technical insight⁵.

Following eminent linguistic anthropologists before him, therefore, Silverstein extends the line of thinking according to which sound enables a sharp line to be drawn between technical »expert« knowledge and lay speaker understanding. To the extent that we accept this division, and look to sound and sound systems as being inaccessible to the »common knowledge« of native speakers, we must also accept the argument that »expert« linguistic knowledge belongs to those who can produce metalinguistic discourse about sounds and sound systems—namely, the linguist trained in systematic phonetic analysis.*

The Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín: Good Science and the Politics of Difference

As I have already indicated, SIL linguists, and their focus on phonetic analysis and orthographic representation of Mayan languages, continued to dominate linguistic analysis from the 1950's on. From the 1970s to the mid-80s, the au-

* Indeed, as multiple experts focused on producing phonetic analyses of Mayan languages in Guatemala, each group sought to legitimate its particular representation of sound through appeals to the »objective« nature of their analyses based upon the science of linguistics.

thority of SIL to research, analyze, and represent Mayan languages began to be contested by Mayas. In 1972 secular North Americans formed the *Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín* (PLFM), a Maya NGO dedicated to the analysis and promotion of Mayan languages. The early years of the PLFM were marked by the involvement of North American secular linguists, most notably, Kaufman and England. However, in 1975 the PLFM became legally, professionally, and administratively Maya, making it the first autonomous Maya NGO dedicated to linguistic analysis.*

Central to the PLFM's mission was, and still continues to be, the development of scientific linguistic research about Mayan languages both *by Mayas* and *for Mayas*, a goal that directly challenges the inherited model of expert knowledge, by undermining the division between expert analysts and native speakers. This challenge was made evident by the stated objectives of the PLFM, which included: 1) To be a center of technical resources in linguistics, made up of native speakers of different Mayan languages, properly chosen and trained; 2) To provide intensive and technical training for native speakers of Mayan languages with respect to the development of linguistic and educational expertise, with the goal to promote Mayan languages by endowing them with dictionaries, syntactic structure and cultural diffusion¹. Explicit in the PLFM's mission is the strong inter-relation of expert knowledge, scientific analysis, and Maya professionalization in the field in which the analysts are native speakers of Mayan languages and the speakers ac-

quire the technical expertise to become analysts. This comprises a radically different epistemology from that construed by SIL, as evidenced by the organization of these three facets of linguistics around the political vision of Maya cultural autonomy and self-determination. The new manner of linking linguistics and politics is best captured by the following words of a Maya scholar, López:

We need to define and apply a political linguistics oriented to the promotion of Mayan languages, not as an isolated factor, but rather as a component that gives identity, strength, and continuity to the Maya people. The [linguistic] information contributes to the process of self-determination and, specifically when compared to the path of preserving Mayan languages, the majority of Mayan speakers lack the information necessary to take part in the decisions. In this way, [the linguistic information] will contribute to those directly responsible for Mayan languages, Mayas themselves, so that they may have the necessarily elements to make use of linguistic rights.

The Mayan Languages Academy of Guatemala and Linguistic Self-Determination

The pioneer work conducted by the PLFM set the stage for a shift in the struggle between SIL/IIN linguists and Maya linguists over who would be the state-recognized legitimate experts on Mayan languages, and who would produce the most authoritative linguistic, particularly phonetic, analyses and orthographic representations.** The turn-

* Linguists worked on several Mayan languages including: K'iche', Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, Q'eqchi', Poqomchi', Mam, Awakateko, Ixil, Q'anjob'al, Akateko, Jakalteko, Chuj, and Chorti'.

** The first task of the new institution was to regularize the Mayan language alphabets. It did this first by forming an all-Maya group to serve as the Provisional Directorial Board of the ALMG. This board organized a seminar, held at CIRMA in June of 1987, dedicated to deciding the best orthographic system for representing Mayan languages. 115 people participated in the event, 93 of whom were Mayas who spoke Mayan languages¹.

ing point for this gradual shift occurred in 1984 when The *Segundo Congreso Lingüístico Nacional* (Second National Linguistics Congress) convened. Unlike the First Congress, Maya linguistics were invited as experts this time around, and played an equal role with missionary linguists, North American secular linguists, elite Ladino scholars, and military personnel. Of the several recommendations made jointly by the participants of the Congress, the most significant for the linguistics of Mayan languages was the recommendation to create a new institution that would deal specifically and exclusively with the analysis and promotion of Mayan languages in Guatemala. The recommendation called for »[the] creation of a Mayan Languages Academy made up of linguists, especially speakers of Mayan languages«⁶, a proposal that underscored the importance of »native« speaker participation in indigenous linguistic analysis.⁸

The creation of an autonomous governmental agency dedicated to Mayan languages brings to a close my brief account of the development and consolidation of the scientific perspective on lin-

guistics in Guatemala. As I have indicated throughout this account, there are good reasons why we might wish to question the perceived status of linguistics as a science, and scrutinize the types of claims that lend authority to that status. Whatever the nature of our critique, however, we cannot ignore the fact that it was by upholding the scientific paradigm of linguistics that Mayan analysts were able to change it. While it may be true that Mayan analysts misrecognized the science of linguistics as a legitimate epistemology for the regimentation of Mayan languages, it is also true that they were able to contribute substantively to the creation of the ALMG as an autonomous and state-recognized institution, and thereby effectively change the direction of linguistics from earlier state-sponsored nation-building practices explicitly directed at eradicating cultural and linguistic difference. Indeed, Maya linguists and scholars look upon the official recognition of the Unified Alphabet and the subsequent officialization of the ALMG in 1990 as substantial victories in their struggle for linguistic self-representation, self-determination and cultural pluralism.

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The creation of the orthography was a substantial victory for Maya linguists. The result of the seminar was the official Unified Alphabet for Mayan Languages. This alphabet received recognition from national government in November 1987 as the official version of the alphabet for Mayan languages. It was made up of 51 graphemes.

* The Mayan Languages Academy of Guatemala's first official responsibility as an autonomous Maya institution was »to study in detail linguistic, pedagogical and other aspects of the proposed alphabets for each language«⁷.

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POLITIKA I SEMIOTIKA GLASOVA – MAJANSKA LINGVISTIKA I FORMIRANJE NACIJE U GVATEMALI

S A Ž E T A K

Ovaj članak razmatra razvoj majanske lingvistike kao zasebnog polja znanosti u Gvatemali, a posebno povezuje aktivnosti misionarskih i majanskih lingvista sa različitim nacionalističkim programima između dvadesetih i osamdesetih godina prošlog stoljeća. Namjera je autora pokazati da u povijesnom i intelektualnom trenutku u kojem lingvistika postaje autoritativna znanstvena disciplina, fonetska analiza postaje kreativni pokazatelj stručne utemeljenosti pojedinih semiotičkih i ideoloških motiva povezanih s različitim verzijama zamišljene gvatemalske zajednice.