Práctica autóctona para revitalizar la lengua Náhuatl en comunidades bilingües de México

Autonomous Nahuatl Language Revitalization
Practice in Bilingual communities of Mexico

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Resumen: Debido a que esfuerzos por preservar idiomas tradicionales pueden excluir identidad comunitaria y realidades lingüísticas, enfoques decoloniales buscan minimizar el efecto del español en el náhuatl. Aquí ofrecemos reflexiones que presentan lo contrario: un estudio de la forma histórica en que los hablantes de náhuatl adoptaron el español se aborda como una estrategia decolonial para apoyar la revitalización del náhuatl en el presente. Los académicos indígenas De la Cruz y Cruz Morales han dado forma a programas de revitalización en sus respectivas comunidades náhuatl hablantes en la región Chiontepec de la Huasteca Veracruzana en México. Al implementar proyectos producidos en consulta con sus propias comunidades y con académicos extranjeros por igual, los coautores han comenzado a cuestionar a quién sirven los materiales de revitalización del idioma. En lugar de referencias al estilo de diccionario que enfatizan el náhuatl estandarizado, el conocimiento oral local dentro del nahuañol, se puede recuperar para servir el aprendizaje y la enseñanza autónoma y autosuficiente del náhuatl. Los ejemplos se basan en estructuras gramaticales históricas todavía presentes en el español local, tal como se habla actualmente en México. Metodológicamente, documentos notariales, escritos por náhuatl hablantes en el siglo XIX ofrecen evidencia de la adopción autónoma de las lenguas coloniales (en este caso, el español). Este proceso histórico ilustra cómo valorar la gramática náhuatl que sustenta el español local actual – una modificación inteligente del español -- según las estructuras náhuatl. Los autores proponen que las variadas expresiones de nahuñol (en este caso tal como se habla en diversas comunidades náhuatl hablantes) facilitan el reconocimiento de las ideas y la gramática náhuatl; los hablantes locales de todas edades ya usan las normas. Miembros y investigadores de la comunidad facilitan el reemplazo del español por el náhuatl, practicando náhuatl sin ser "enseñados" desde afuera y sin necesidad de leer; un enfoque que invita al ejercicio del náhuatl en su diversidad local.

Palabras clave: Revitalización lengua náhuatl, México bilingüe nahuñol, notario indígena, catequistas, motochihuanih.

Abstract. Because efforts to preserve traditional languages can exclude community identity and linguistic realities, decolonial approaches rightly seek to minimize the effect of Spanish on Nahuatl. Here we offer reflections on research that propose the inverse – a study of the way historical Nahuatl speakers adopted Spanish is discussed as a decolonial strategy to support Nahuatl revitalization in the present. Indigenous scholars De la Cruz and Cruz Morales have for years helped shape revitalization programs in their respective Nahuatl-speaking Chiontepec communities in the Huasteca Veracruzana of Mexico. While implementing projects produced in consultation with their own communities and with foreign academics alike, the coauthors have begun to question who is being served by language revitalization materials. Instead of dictionary-style references emphasizing standardized Nahuatl, local oral knowledge within spoken Nahuñol can be reclaimed to serve as a basis for autonomous, self-sustaining Nahuatl learning and teaching. Examples draw on historical grammatical structures, many still present in the local Spanish as actually spoken in Mexico.
today. Methodologically, notarial records written by Nahuatl-speakers in the nineteenth century offer evidence of the autonomous adoption of colonial tongues (in this case, Spanish). This historical process illustrates how to consider the Nahuatl grammar underpinning today’s local Spanish as valuable, an intelligent modification of Spanish according to Nahuatl structures. The authors propose that varied expressions of Nahuañol (in this case as spoken in Nahuatl-speaking communities) facilitate recognition of Nahuatl ideas and grammar; local speakers of all ages already use the rules. Community member-researchers facilitate the replacement of Spanish with Nahuatl, practicing Nahuatl without being “taught” and without needing to read – a process that invites exercise of Nahuatl in its local diversity.

**Keywords:** Nahuatl Language Revitalization, bilingual Mexico Nahuañol, indigenous notary, catequistas, motiochihuanih.
1. Introduction

Es decir, la realidad de la educación de nuestra lengua materna hoy es sólo oral. Porque como se sabe, por años se ha prohibido la lengua, por tal razón solo existen talleres, cursos. Se revitaliza la lengua, ¿A quienes?"

-- Ofelia Cruz Morales, coauthor, teacher, and indigenous researcher from Tecomate

UNESCO’s Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 encouraged the authors to address a delicate problem: revitalization programs, though essential, have unintentionally created erasure through a reliance on written materials like orthographies that standardize language according to national borders. Missionaries, academics, and revolutionaries intersect in expecting standardization, which complicates an already contested and colonized oral landscape. In some instances, erasure of colonial usages also erases indigenous knowledge:

Orthographies commonly used today for modern Nahuatl developed independently of the earlier colonial conventions...create an orthographic chasm between older and modern writing, making it practically impossible for a young student trained in the modern systems to read the enormous and rich written legacy of his or her ancestors. (Justyna Olko & John Sullivan, 2014, p. 204).

This paper proposes a counter-intuitive practice: integration of regional differences signaled in local indigenous usage of “Nahuañol” (a mixture of Spanish and Nahuatl) as a vehicle to combat homogenization (Flores Farfan 1988) in native language preservation efforts. Indigenous researcher-authors of this study ask: how can our analphabetic communities be better served by language revitalization? Based on a reflection on the limited adoption in their communities of Tepexitla and Tecomate, the coauthors De la Cruz and Cruz Morales observe external inputs in the name of revitalizing mother tongues, including Nahuatl workshops and books which they helped create, as having little consequence in their communities.

Concluding that local vernacular constructions of Nahuañol are shaped by indigenous ideas and grammar, the authors fill a gap in the research in support of Nahuatl-speaking researchers, and practices that use vernacular Nahuañol to disseminate knowledge in our own communities. A linguistic lens tells us this is not a “bad grammar”, but an indigenous grammar applied to Spanish. Archival evidence supports the value of Nahuañol as an ongoing contemporary practice. Historical documents show that Nahuatl notaries, far from being a tabula rasa, did not supplant their own way of thinking and speaking. Instead, we show how notaries created a locally negotiated Spanish in the first decades of the 19th century, a time when Nahuatl remained the dominant tongue within their Metepec municipality and Nahuañol first appeared in the documents of indigenous writers. Archival evidence shows that this multilingual process has occurred in central Mexico for hundreds of years. Thus, indigenous education and life-long language-learning might benefit from a community practice that incorporates the understanding that acquisition of colonial languages happens within local indigenous grammatical and conceptual frameworks; no matter the linguistic contact stage (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976; Lockhart 1992). In other words:

Es crucial tomar en cuenta que las variedades del español, producto del contacto con otras lenguas, como es el caso del español andino peruano ... no pueden continuar siendo tratadas como barbarismos o como producciones imperfectas, pues se trata de sistemas de comunicación dinámicos resultantes de realidades sociohistóricas particulares y que responden eficientemente a las necesidades comunicativas de sus hablantes. (Sichra, 2020, p. 10)
2. Disseminating Knowledge: Interviews with *motiochihuanih*

Ongoing research on local religion in Nahuatl-speaking communities in the Huasteca Veracruzana (Cruz de la Cruz 2016, 2017) illustrates a multilingual local environment. Small, isolated villages in a landscape dominated by mountains and valleys in the region of Chicontepec, Mexico, people live in contact with Catholicism and Spanish alongside their mother tongue, Nahuatl. Younger generations, while still speaking Nahuatl at home, use Spanish in the wider world and are learning English.

Abelardo de la Cruz’s interviews in this region document the work of *motiochihuanih*, the people that work as “catequistas” or native theology teachers based in indigenous Catholic churches. His research also identifies the work of “rezanderos,” those in charge of producing rituals in honor of the beloved dead. The motiochihuanih, as macehualli (native Nahuas) speak Nahuatl, but they read in Spanish. As commonly documented in research, spoken Spanish in this region is very influenced by Nahuatl. A local, vernacular Spanish is common practice in the region of Chicontepec.

Instead of imposing outside standards (Cruz de la Cruz, Abelardo and Cruz Cruz Eduardo, 2016) that consider local ways of speaking wrong, the coauthor-researchers studying their own communities are using it as an advantage. Because the researchers are local, their translations of interviews with their motiochihuanih are created in a local Spanish vernacular that they all speak. These are well received, and effectual in terms of dissemination, for it respects -- but also integrates -- the local way of speaking. (Cenobio Martínez Rosas, Juan Bautista Martínez, and Fulgencio Martínez Antonia, 2014)

Even though the motiochihuanih understand standard Castillian, they speak a vernacular Nahuatl-inflected Spanish in their towns, or pueblos. Because of translations that the authors have created based on local usage, the motiochihuanih comprehend the intellectual products they are involved in constructing. Because these indigenous church officials speak a vernacular Spanish based on Nahuatl, researchers have found that motiochihuanih and “rezanderos” read and use the research about local religion produced in vernacular Spanish.

Not only is it more physically accessible due to its personal and local dissemination, but the concepts of the research itself are more understandable: because their vernacular Spanish is structured on Nahuatl, they understand the research more deeply than many standard-Spanish speakers might. When they read the research, they integrate much of the historical Nahuatl manuscripts studied and used as evidence (Cruz de la Cruz, 2017).

This research reveals pitfalls of some current revitalization approaches that use orthographies for modern Nahuatl developed independently of the earlier colonial conventions. There are many good projects, but in practice indigenous communities merely receive the deliverables, the books, and articles; and are not integrated into the studies themselves. Older Nahuatl is not easily intelligible to native speakers, much like Old English to English Speakers, but even common modern Nahuatl orthographies can erase connections to a rich written Nahuatl heritage (Olko & Sullivan, 2014, p. 204).

Standard Spanish can create the same obstacles, erasing non-standard local usages. Further, the books and dictionaries that arrive to our communities only serve the literate. The question becomes: Who is served by language revitalization programs? “No basta con regresar Cds o kilos de papel impreso a las comunidades, materiales que tienen poca resonancia y pertinencia en ámbitos comunitarios” “It is not enough to return with CDs or kilos of printed paper to communities, materials that have little resonance or
pertinence to the communities themselves (Flores Farfán 2013, 17; translation by authors).

Coauthors De la Cruz and Cruz Morales identify a drawback in the local approach we present here: “too few of us” work with and within our communities as researchers. Because this research seeks to break academic hierarchies, to refocus knowledge as something created within and in contact with the Nahua groups studied, it becomes clear that more resources need to be offered to native speakers to study at the university level, thus producing knowledge decodable and relevant to our communities and more effective in terms of the transmission of indigenous knowledge. This recognition of the need for local researchers is echoed in the outstanding effort by Olko and Sullivan to promote a monolingual university program grounded in international collaboration but coordinating with state institutions (Olko & Sullivan, 2014, p. 211), a promising model that integrates the diversity of local researchers’ communities to global systems of revitalization.

Said research, as in this example of the study of motiochihuanih, is more intelligible to our communities because the researchers are local Nahuatl speakers that also encourage communication in local Nahuatl — and produce materials written in the local “Spanish” vernacular that we all speak. This might seem contraindicated for Nahuatl revitalization, but as we turn to look at the historical evidence, we find that Nahuatl grammar directs local “non-standard” Spanish. Trained local speakers, applying this simple concept, practice and encourage awareness of the Nahuatliness of local Spanish.

3. Evidence and Examples: Archival Nahuañol

--Este proyecto nació como respuesta al deseo de algunas comunidades de recorder y revalorizar sus conocimientos ancestrales (Haboud, 2020, p. 63).

This section doubles as basic training in the historical evidence for how Nahuatl can be shown to underpin Nahuañol, and a short guide containing five things to look for in spoken and written Nahuañol to identify, value, and disseminate Nahuatl understandings in the way our communities communicate.

The following historical examples were crafted by San Bartolomé Tlatelolco’s indigenous escribanos or notaries, Nahua/Mexica/macelualli intellectuals (Melton-Villanueva 2016). Because these texts were written in Nahuañol Spanish, I almost did not include them in my original research about nineteenth century Nahuatl wills. However, because they were written by native Nahuatl speakers, their Spanish was particularly interesting. The structure and word choice show examples of continuity from Nahuatl; their documents make perfect sense to their own communities of Nahuatl language speakers, even if they are at first puzzling to the reader (McDonough 2014). For it is easiest to dismiss language strategies as nonstandard when we do not understand the rules that create them.

This is how we can say that the transition to Mexican Spanish happens in an intimate way. Nahuañol reflects the nuances of local vernaculars hidden from, and adding dimension to, regional sociolinguistic data. As seen below, Nahua intellectuals’ careful work expresses centuries-long Nahuatl-language concepts as they implemented Spanish in the national period, allowing a window into traditional Nahuatl within Nahuañol.

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1 Much of the research in this section can be found in Melton-Villanueva’s 2016 book about Nahua culture and society in the first quarter of the 19th century.

2 McDonough challenges us to resist the dominant impulse to preference language “purity” and include in analysis the varied language choices available to Nahua intellectuals, past and present. She observes that language choice reflects more than one’s ethnic identity; it changes according to situation. She analyzes texts in Nahuatl, Latin, and the type of Nahuañol seen here, showing how a chosen language reflects situational factors not limited to one’s ethnic identity. McDonough, The Learned Ones, 14.
For historical context, it is important to note that despite three centuries of close contact with Castillian-speaking colonizers and the adoption of oral Spanish, it was not until the overthrow of Spanish control that San Bartolomé Tlatelolco’s escribano-notaries finally adopted Spanish for writing (Melton-Villanueva 2016, 46). But the shift did not come from a wholesale nor inaccurate copying of Spanish writing. Rather, by comparing texts from central Mexican Nahua communities, it is shown that Nahuañol emerged from their own internal and long-standing and nearly unchanged Nahuatl-language formulas. Thus, after an entire colonial period of selectively tolerating, ignoring, and defying the legal decrees aimed at eradicating indigenous languages, Mexican escribanos began to adopt Spanish as a means of preserving their communities’ interests – a process relevant to multilingual language strategies today.

3.1 Example 1

The following example written Nahuañol is shown as a simple tool to practice teaching oral and written Nahuatl based on how people communicate today. In Figure 1 Máximo Calistro, a native Nahuatl speaker, wrote a will in 1821 with flowery and precise cursive, yet trying to read it can challenge many expectations of standard Spanish (Calistro 1821). The way words form gives a feeling of disorientation to those unfamiliar with Nahuañol—words combine to form an aggregate of words: “amidifunta . . . selaboy de Jando . . . serre conpartira enguales partes Cun plase mipalabra.” To give the English reader an approximate sense of what this looks like, imagine a combination of both aggregated and dismembered word-phrases like, “mydeceased [aggregation] . . . iamleav ingher [the first three words lumped together, with division of leav-ing, the ing added to her] . . . willbede vided i nequal [note the n divorced from in] parts Respectedshallbe myword.”
3.2 Example 2

For contrast, the escribano Juan Máximo Mexía separates almost everything into individual syllables in Figure 2. By applying his correct understanding that Spanish does not aggregate like Nahuatl, he essentially over-corrects, separating syllables in a way that tells us how nonsensical the attempt to divide up ideas must seem to Nahuatl grammar: “A qui pi esa mi es critura” (read as, Aqui empieza me escritura or here begins my written document [or more approximately, Here be gins my wri ting]).

Today, this vernacular Nahuañol spelling practice (erroneously considered illiterate) can similarly slice words, depending on local variations. Nahuatl can hold very large words, more precisely called word-phrases, as a complex grouping of many syllables that together create a composite meaning. Identifying this traditional structure, called agglutination, can free Nahuañol speakers from the need to standardize their writing according to Castilian concepts – the two approaches to the division of words reflect the local diversity of Nahuañol.

Further, understanding or experimenting with the Nahuatl concept of agglutination then becomes a vehicle to teach an oral structure already practiced in local communities: you add suffixes and prefixes on to a root until you get a perhaps ten-syllable group that has a larger meaning than just one root. Juan Máximo Mexía, in this case applying Spanish disaggregation in Figure 2, employed a strategy opposed to Nahuatl combinations. In this sense, his disassociated syllables meant “Castillian” to Nahuañol speakers. This practice can now be valued and extolled, instead of criticized as illiterate, for it is founded it a tradition of literacy that predates the arrival of Europeans.

3.3 Example 3

Nahuatl speakers tend to prefer lo for all direct objects and even for indirect objects. For example, the way lo is used to agree with alma, when in Castilian Spanish it would be la (De la Merced 1813). Teaching with this usage offers a way to perceive existing knowledge – the way the Nahuatl language avoids marking gender entirely.
In this practice, the use of lo and de illustrates how Nahuatl does not mark gender for object prefixes (or for anything else for that matter). Teaching from within the way Spanish is being changed shows a brilliant strategy to avoid a minefield of Castilian gender agreement with "los." This successful grammatical strategy continues to be used this day.

3.4 Example 4

Nahuañol can also serve to illustrate specific indigenous Nahuatl verb construction. The common use of the verb ir (to go) in "se nos fue Dexando" and "se los voy dexando" are not used like this in customary Spanish. Here they mean "that she left us" and "I am leaving it to," respectively. But the construction itself would be useful for heritage speakers and students of Nahuatl to identify, for they represent the auxiliary of going -tiuh/-to, so familiar in Nahuatl, in this case meaning to do upon dying.

3.5 Example 5

Sometimes common vernacular phrasings can be obscure, or native meanings not fully understood. Nationwide, Mexican Spanish carries a ubiquitous use of the diminutive, but the intention is reverential, because the diminutive is the equivalent of the Nahuatl reverential suffix -tzin. "Mi . . . Madresita" is a literal equivalent of the Nahuatl nonantzin (my beloved mother). The -tzin gives a phrase like "my mother" a formal devotional sense, and it is this operative sense that infuses the meaning of the diminutive in Mexico to this day. Similarly, diosito as commonly used in Mexico, if literally translated as "little god," misses the full sense of the reverential Nahuatl intention if only understood as vernacular Castillian.

When Nahuañol speakers find themselves in a "Spanish" class that only teaches Castilian, as commonly happens in the United States, it would be useful for the student to understand and value their own use and meanings of diminutive, despite it being "nonstandard" to those unfamiliar with Mexican Spanish.

The question becomes, if these select archival examples highlight the cleverness of Nahuañol, how much more useful might grammatical transparency, or the recognizing Nahuañol's indigenous foundations, serve toward the purpose of revitalizing Nahuatl in our communities? By training local native researchers to identify, value, and disseminate the consciousness of Nahuatl usage in our communities, even heritage speakers that may not read or write can learn to identify basic Nahuatl patterns they already understand and use within a colonial Spanish. This humble preliminary strategy from the historical discipline values the autonomous multilingual knowledge of indigenous communities even when they are impacted by a colonial language like Spanish, and furthers revitalization based on widely used vernacular patterns that, in this case, need only be valued and identified as Nahuatl.

4. Global Implications

"Otros motivo de sorpresa en las comunidades fue darse cuenta de que la lengua quichua sí se escribía (recordemos que las entrevistas eran bilingües), hecho que claramente aportó positivamente a la valoración de su lengua (Haboud, 2020, p. 56)"
This paper reflects on original research by Mexican scholars in two case studies with examples from contemporary interviews, and archival documents, respectively. But this reframing of indigenous languages as the basis for local versions of colonial tongues has not appeared in isolation. This data is well known in international linguistic research (Flores Farfan 2013; Escobar 2000). Research of Paraguayan Spanish found the influence of Guaraní (Palacios 2005, 38–40). Research into Bolivian Spanish found significant borrowing of Aimara in Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina (Pérez 2000, 339–54). Another study found Quechua in Ecuadorian Spanish (Palacios April 12, 2005b). An Argentinean dissertation study found similar indigenous pronoun strategies (Martínez 2000). Many other studies have found Maya patterns in Guatemalan and Mexican Spanish (Chamoreau, Lastra, and Estrada Fernández 2005; Michnowicz 2006). While these observations can be found beginning the 1940’s this data remains generally isolated in small linguistic circles.

Considering vernacular adaptations of colonial languages is a well-documented phenomenon in bi/multilingual contexts, using indigenous varieties of Spanish is an actionable practice. The coauthors hope that contextualizing this data historically will raise the status of bi/multilingualism. In our data, Nahuañol was and is as a common strategy to be valued for its grammatical as well as cultural heritage, fundamentally indigenous strategies for interpreting a changing world.

The authors aim to stimulate intercultural scholarly debate around indigenous language teaching strategies that center local indigenous-influenced vernaculars. How to do this without privileging Spanish as the primary language of communication remains a relevant pitfall that can only be partially avoided if framed as an extension of Nahuatl. The essential idea is for everyone to embrace and not stigmatize the different forms of Nahuatl spoken in our communities. By empowering community members, and wider world cultures, to identify the far-reaching influence of indigenous languages on the development of Spanish, the authors aim to encourage investment for community members to engage in their own research and trust their own knowledge-production even within colonial terms -- what remains is to re-orient toward indigenous-language learning within these local ways of speaking.

Based on the coauthors’ experiences as Nahuatl-speaking researchers in their own communities, a local vernacular of Nahuatl-influenced Spanish continues to be normative. Supported by archival research that illustrates how linguistic change occurs within a preexisting indigenous Nahuatl lexicon, the authors reveal Spanish vernacular to be an autonomous creation. Thus, indigenous constructions of colonial languages, often considered inferior, ignorant, or corrupt forms of Spanish, can actually serve as the basis for autonomous native-language learning and teaching because the constructions, often unintelligible to Spanish speakers, reflect local indigenous structures. In this way, we destabilize language revitalization approaches that perceive Spanish as always undesirable and ask for another consideration of sociolinguistic contexts. While the goals of research projects are set by the community, the methods and practices researchers take can influence the outcome. In the above case of interviews with motiochihuanih, the people that work as native theology teachers based in indigenous Catholic churches, the key to its success was being able to respond in local Nahuáñol, which emphasizes the need for investment funds to reach students interested in researching in their own communities. Regionally varied expressions of local Mexican Spanish/ Nahuáñol might be valued and employed to uncover their own communities’ indigenous grammar.
5. Conclusion

If defined as language loss, the ‘conquest’ did not reach completion with the simple introduction of colonial languages. Coauthor Abelardo De la Cruz remembers visiting his cousins one summer when he was 7 years old. It was mosquito season. His uncle, a Spanish teacher, became extremely angry when he heard his daughter call the mosquitoes *atepotzomeh*. Even though they all could speak Nahuatl fluently, he did not allow his daughters to use Nahuatl in the home. De la Cruz still remembers his cousin screaming *Atepotzomeh! Atepotzomeh!* in emphatic response to her father’s censure. If swatting away a mosquito can challenge colonial structures, perhaps general patterns of speech and grammar illustrated here testify to a process of repatriating a living native tongue from an only nominally homogeneous Castilian.

This shift in knowledge dissemination recenters indigenous language learners within our own heritage languages, as active participants, and teachers, to explore the way our communities choose to speak with local versions of Nahuatl. When trained researchers return to their own communities with vernacular discoveries within dominant languages, they help identify the indigenous patterns of oral speakers as a tool of native language revitalization -- instead of language education as dependent, constructed and taught from the outside. Archival case studies presented the way Nahuatl, a common Mexican Spanish, found to be rich in Nahuatl foundations, can actually represent the evolution of a national treasure: the intellectual patrimony of Nahuatl-speaking custodians. Traditional structures, once recognized, provide access to local lexical and conceptual information for facilitators of indigenous language preservation.

This argument does not seek to impose dominant tongues on indigenous communities; rather it seeks to stimulate a debate among researchers committed to revitalizing and cherishing indigenous languages worldwide, in native terms, in response to sociolinguistic contexts. Even young or old heritage speakers that cannot read can be shown by a local researcher, and themselves teach how their local language-use shows complex responses based firmly in their own cultural-linguistic knowledge -- for a sustainable, life-long intergenerational learning practices. Such repatriated language heritage calls for moving forward with empirically based teaching innovations for the revitalization of locally expressed, live, indigenous languages.
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