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The need for capacity building in Mexico: Misión de Chichimecas, a case study

Yolanda Lastra

1. Introduction

When the Spanish conquerors arrived in 1519 in what is today Mexico, many languages were spoken, but in the central part Nahuatl predominated because it was the language of the Aztecs who were in control of a vast territory.

After some relatively peaceful years, with the discovery of silver in Zacatecas the numerous bands of hunters and gatherers (collectively called Chichimecs by the Spaniards) started to attack the travelers and their Indian allies who invaded the territory located between the mines and the already colonized sites. It took fifty years for the conquerors to 'pacify' the northern and western territory. This was achieved by killing many of the Indians who tried to defend their territory and way of life. Thanks to missionaries, peace was finally made, offering Chichimecs food and clothing and establishing among them colonies of Indian agriculturalists already Christianized.

According to estimates made by Borah and Cook (1963), the population of central Mexico shortly before conquest was around 25 million. Between 1520 and 1620, the indigenous population declined until in 1620 it was less than one million. This demographic catastrophe was due to battles, massacres, slavery, and bad treatment, but also largely to the illnesses brought by the Europeans. Indians had no immunity and died of smallpox, measles, and other diseases. Indian languages continued to be used by the decimated Indians, and there was bilingualism in local languages and Nahuatl or Spanish on the part of local rulers.

With independence (the first constitution dates back to 1824) the situation began to change and schooling was delivered only in Spanish. From 1911 to 1930, the use of indigenous languages in schools was forbidden. It was not until the election of President Cárdenas in the 1930's that a change in Indian education took place. It was demonstrated that speakers of Purepecha could quickly learn to read and write their language and then learn Spanish and its writing system. The project was short-lived, however.

From then on we witness the continued change of education programmes with every new presidential administration. The president appoints the Secretary of Education who brings his team with him. Higher officials appoint lower ones and no one approves of the work done during the previous administration (a state of affairs unfortunately also seen in Africa, as Dimmendaal, this volume, points out).

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In 1948, the National Indigenous Institute was created and bilingual education became one of its goals. But teaching in most bilingual schools continued to be in Spanish. In the 1980's, the necessity for bilingual and bicultural teaching was again pointed out, and more recently the agency responsible for Indian education renamed its program 'Bilingual and Intercultural' education.

No one can deny that there has been some progress. Children are no longer punished for speaking their mother tongue. Indigenous songs are heard, the National Anthem is taught in the local languages. Books, which are often really just primers, usually prepared at a central office in Mexico City, are distributed freely, but the time allotted to teaching literacy in the Indian language is hardly enough for the task. This is to say nothing of the fact that in many areas no subjects such as geography or history are taught in the Indian languages. The main problem, however, is the negative attitude of the teachers toward their own native language. They use it to communicate with the pupils, but they prefer to teach in Spanish, partly because this is the way they were taught themselves.

2. Indian languages currently spoken in Mexico

Spanish is spoken as a first language by the large majority of the population, roughly 92%; and as a second language by another 7%. There remain about one million monolinguals in indigenous languages according to the 2000 census.

Table 1 (next page) gives the number of speakers of indigenous Mexican languages arranged in descreasing order. The census counts people who are 5 years of age or older. In that age group there is a total population of 84,794,454. In recent censuses, the names of dialects spoken in certain areas have been included. Here we follow Pellicer *et al.* (forthcoming) who list them according to their traditional names. Where a plural form appears it refers to a family of languages rather than a single language. The stock to which the languages belong is given in parenthesis. It is encouraging to find that Mayan languages spoken by Guatemalan refugees have been counted.

3. The need for full language descriptions

For the preparation of adequate teaching materials appropriate descriptions of the languages are needed. We will point out some of the languages or language groups in need of grammars or dictionaries mentioning only those groups with large-enough populations for which teaching materials are necessary.

Nahua (Uto-Aztecan)	1,448,936	Kanjobal (Mayan)	9,015
Yucatec (Mayan)	800,291	Pames (Otomanguean)	8,312
Zapotec (Otomanguean)	451,038	Mam (Mayan)	7,580
Mixtec (Otomanguean)	440,796	Chontal de Oaxaca	4,959
Tzotzil (Mayan)	297,561	[Tequistlatec] (Hokan?)	
Otomi (Otomanguean)	291,722	Chuj (Mayan)	1,796
Tzeltal (Mayan)	284,826	Guarijio (Uto-Aztecan)	1,671
Totonac (Totonacan)	240,034	Chichimeco Jonaz	1,641
Mazatec (Otomanguean)	214,447	(Otomanguean)	
Chol (Mayan)	161,766	Matlatzinca (Otomanguean)	1,302
Huasteco (Mayan)	150,257	Chocho (Otomanguean)	992
Mazahua (Otomanguean)	133,413	Pima bajo (Uto-Aztecan)	741
Chinantec (Otomanguean)	133,374	Kekchi (Mayan)	677
Purépecha (isolate)	121,409	Jacalteco (Mayan)	529
Mixes (Mixe-Zoquean)	118,924	Ocuilteco (Otomanguean)	466
Tlapanec (Otomanguean)	99,389	Seri (Yuman)	458
Tarahumara (Uto-Aztecan)	75,545	Ixcateco (Otomanguean)	351
Zoque (Mixe-Zoquean)	51,464	Quiche (Mayan)	246
Amuzgo (Otomanguean)	41,455	Cakchiquel (Mayan)	210
Chatino (Otomanguean)	40,722	Paipai (Yuman)	201
Chontal de Tabasco (Mayan)	38,561	Cucapa (Yuman)	178
Popoluca (Mixe-Zoquean)	38,139	Motocintleco (Mayan)	174
Tojolabal (Maya)	37,986	Kumiai (Yuman)	161
Mayo (Uto-Aztecan)	31,513	Papago (Uto-Aztecan)	141
Huichol (Uto-Aztecan)	30,686	Kikapu (Algonquian)	138
Tepehua (Uto-Aztecan)	25,544	Ixil (Mayan)	90
Trique (Otomanguean)	20,712	Cochimi (Yuman)	82
Popoloca (Otomanguean)	16,468	Kiliwa (Yuman)	52
Cora (Uto-Aztecan)	16,410	Lacandon (Mayan)	40
Huave (isolate)	14,224	Aguacateco (Mayan)	23
Cuicateco (Otomanguean)	13,425	Solteco (Otomanguean)	06
Yaqui (Uto-Aztecan)	13,317	Papabuco (Otomanguean)	05
Tepehuas (Totonacan)	9,435		

Table 1: Indian Languages of Mexico sorted by number of speakers 5 years or older

- the Uto-Aztecan family, according to Dakin (1994) has been fairly well described. MacKay (1994) considers that Tepehua needs much more work.
- other Totonacan languages fare better. Within Otopamean languages, both Pame and Chichimec lack complete grammars and dictionaries.

- Otomí needs grammars of some dialects such as Texcatepec and San Pablito.
- a full-fledged Mazahua grammar and a dictionary with information on dialect variation would be desirable.
- within the rest of Otomanguean there are about 30 Mixtec languages. Some have been described and some not and there are dictionaries for only four.
- there are two or three Trique languages with one grammar and one dictionary but not of the same language.
- for the two Amuzgo languages there are no modern grammars; dictionaries are in preparation.
- there are five Chatino languages, with two dictionaries and one syntactic description (see Woodbury and England, this volume). The 38 or so Zapotec languages have only been partially described. The 15 southern languages have only one published dictionary. There are four grammars, but none for the southern varieties (Smith-Stark, 1995).
- modern studies of Chinantec are mostly by SIL researchers who have done intelligibility testing and dialectal comparisons and recognize 14 languages (Merrifield, 1995). There are many publications on particular aspects of grammar, but reference grammars and dictionaries are still in preparation. There are, however, six good sketches of Chinantec grammar.
- Popolocan studies are reviewed by Veerman (1995): Mazatec and Popoloca are fairly well described; there is no phonological description of any Chocho dialect; a grammatical sketch has been prepared by Veerman herself.
- Tlapanec grammar is well covered by Suárez (1983, 1988) and Weathers (1975); a dictionary would be necessary.
- Purepecha [Tarascan] has three main dialect areas: Sierra, Lakes, and Cañada (gully). There has been a good deal of work on the language, perhaps too technical to serve as a basis for teaching materials. A reference grammar and a modern comprehensive dictionary are lacking.
- aside from the need to carry on more work on Tequistlateco for comparative purposes, a reference grammar would be useful.
- there are articles on different topics of Huave grammar, as well as a useful grammatical sketch in the 1976 dictionary by Stairs and Stairs. Several linguists are now working on this language.
- there are 16 Mixe-Zoquean languages spoken in the states of Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas, and Oaxaca. A survey of descriptive materials on these languages is Wichmann (1994), but more work has been carried out since then.
- the Mayan family includes some thirty languages spoken in Mexico and parts of Central America. According to Hopkins and Josserand (1994) many studies are

the result of McQuown's projects: several grammars were doctoral dissertations and more than twenty were theses. Other grammars have also been published. There are also modern dictionaries some, but not all, by SIL members, and text collections.

Fortunately, there is a growing number of native-speaker linguists who continue to carry on work on these languages (see also Woodbury and England, this volume, for a listing of native speakers who have been trained at the University of Texas, Austin).

4. The new language legislation

Education in Mexico has recently been decentralized to a certain extent. Each state has its own department of education and some degree of administrative control, but textbook production as well as the design of programs to be covered in each school year has continued to be in the hands of the SEP (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*). Until recently, bilingual education was in the hands of the DGEI (*Dirección General de Educación Indígena*), a department of the SEP. This agency was in charge of preparing teaching materials and organizing workshops for teacher training.

Bilingual teachers have been largely bilingual young people with secondary school diplomas who may get further training once they have been employed. Before bilingual teaching was instituted, teachers were generally Spanish monolinguals with some normal school studies. It was hard to find adequately trained bilinguals, therefore makeshift workshops became the solution.

A few inspectors and supervisors in the bilingual programs have graduated from normal schools and from special programs instituted by CIESAS *(Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social).* The last few generations of the CIESAS graduates speak an Indian language and have solid training in linguistics and pedagogy; unfortunately, there are very few of these well-trained people, but at least a good start has been made.

As already hinted at, there has always been a vast difference between theory and practice, between what law and directives prescribe and actual teaching. Not enough progress was made up to 1994, neither in bilingual education nor in the other rights of Indian citizens. On January 1st 1994 the Zapatista army rebelled in Chiapas. The need to provide solutions for economic, social, and political problems affecting indigenous peoples was evident; the president ordered a cease-fire and a Committee with members of the three major parties was appointed to have a dialogue with the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*). Two years later the San Andrés Larrrainzar accords were signed, dealing with justice, political representation, autonomous territoriality, human rights, language, education, and culture. When the accords were taken to the government, it objected mainly to autonomous territoriality and the EZLN did not accept the changes proposed by the administration.

In 2000 the official party, *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) that had held power for 70 years lost the presidential election and the conservative *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) came into power. Surprisingly, the following year the EZLN was allowed to march from Chiapas to Mexico City and to give speeches in the lower house of Parliament (*Cámara de Diputados*). Thereupon the government urged Congress to pass a law on Indigenous Rights and Culture. The Senate transformed the proposal into constitutional reforms which did not satisfy anyone. After many legal recourses, which they lost, the indigenous groups decided to fight, at least, for linguistic rights and bilingual education areas, where they knew they could obtain advantages. The existence of international agreements signed by Mexico recognizing linguistic rights was in their favor (Pellicer et al., forthcoming).

Some old projects formed the basis for the new law called General Law on Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was finally passed after much discussion and became official on March 13, 2003 (Diario de Campo, 2003). The introductory justification includes the following words (my translation):

> "No human group survives the death of its mother tongue, for this reason with this law every national language will become part of the historical and cultural patrimony of our nation, since they are granted the same rights to be used, diffused and developed, because the Mexican nation is a synthesis of the union and the conflict between indigenous cultures and Spanish culture in which the respective languages played a relevant role. The process has lasted more than 500 years and even though Spanish was imposed as the common language of the emergent nation, the indigenous roots and tongues have refused to die or be forgotten."

The first chapter of the law itself declares Indian languages to be national along with Spanish; and recognizes linguistic rights, individual and collective. The use of the languages should be promoted by federal, state, and local governments. The languages are not only those of peoples who were in the territory before the establishment of the state, but also those who have arrived later and settled in it. (This, to my mind, is very important because it protects Guatemalan refugees.) The government should guarantee the use of the languages in the media. They are to be valid for any paperwork involving the government, for requesting services and public information. No one is to be discriminated against for speaking an Indian language.

The second chapter specifies that interpreters with knowledge of local customs are to be employed in the administration of justice be it federal, labor, or agrarian. Bilingual intercultural education in indigenous communities is obligatory. The third refers to the duties of the federal, state and municipal governments in order to carry out the law. The fourth chapter creates an Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas*) which is to implement the law. A long list of its duties is given, among them:

- to promote the usage of the languages;
- to stimulate their knowledge;
- to establish programmes to train bilingual technicians;
- to promote the production of grammars, and the standardization of writing systems;
- to do research on linguistic diversity and carry out a sociolinguistic census by March 2005;
- to advise government institutions, etc.

The Institute will be administered by a *National Council* with seven representatives from the federal government, three from indigenous institutions of higher learning and three from academic institutions which have taken part in the defense of the languages. The Council will propose three candidates to the President of the Republic who will select one as director. The Council, with the advice of the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática,* with representatives from the indigenous communities and the academic institutions which will be part of the Council, will write a catalogue of indigenous languages which will be published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación*.

In my opinion the first three chapters of the law are commendable, but their provisions are to be carried out by this new Institute which will have a budget of its own and may or may not be able to achieve the tasks entrusted to it. Furthermore the so-called catalogue will no doubt lead to complaints on the part of poor and forgotten communities if the people responsible for writing it do not include every single dialect, a task which may not be desirable, because it may lead to further fragmentation and may not encourage standardization. However, listing the languages by the name of the language families or ethnic groups, which has been the custom of federal government agencies so far, does not take important linguistic differences into account.

It is too early to tell whether the actual linguistic situation in Mexico will improve or not with the new legislation. For the moment, as an example of the present-day situation, let us take a look at one small community located in the state of Guanajuato where Chichimeco Jonaz is spoken.

5. Misión de Chichimecas

Chichimeco Jonaz and Pame constitute the northernmost branch of the Otopamean family. Matlatzinca and Ocuilteco on the one hand, and Mazahua and Otomí on the other, belong to the other branches of Otopamean which is spoken in the central part of Mexico. Otopame in turn belongs to the Otomangean stock made up by seven other families found for the most part in Oaxaca.

Chichimeco Jonaz is only spoken in the Misión the Chichimecas, a community located immediately north of San Luis de la Paz, Guanajuato. The speakers call themselves **ézą̣?ą̣r** and their language **úzą̣**, when speaking Spanish they use the word **chichimeco** and not the word **jonaz**. This term appears in one sixteenth century document, but was not much used until the eighteenth century. The date of their settlement in the Misión is not clear. In all probability they descend from a war-like group of hunters and gatherers whose territory included what is now known as Sierra Gorda, the ranges which are part of the Sierra Madre Oriental crossing the Northeast of the State of Guanajuato, the southern part of San Luis Potosí, the North of Querétaro, and the northeastern part of Hidalgo.

According to oral tradition, Chichimecs were granted land by a Spanish viceroy in the sixteenth century. They consider that the territory has always been theirs and they could have had better lands if the *mestizos* had not taken them away. The present-day *ejido* (land held in common) has fairly good land, but the place where they live is arid, cold, and dreary. They are all poor. Some houses are brick, others adobe, most of them small. Ever since the 1930's they have tried to obtain help from the Federal Government and they often do, but somehow the results are never evident.

According to the 2000 census, there are 1,641 speakers of the language, but my consultant estimates there are only about 800 speakers out of a total of approximately 4,000 people who live in the *ejido*. In the 1970's a highway running roughly from east to west was built cutting across Chichimec territory. Subsequently, the southern part which is closer to the town of San Luis de la Paz (the county seat) became known as Misión de Abajo and the northern part as Misión de Arriba. It is in this latter part that the language is best preserved although it is losing ground in both areas due to the lack of land, the necessity to find work outside the village, the long years when only Spanish was taught, and the negative attitude of Spanish speakers towards Indian languages.

Education in the Misión has improved since the 1980's when more schools were built. At present there is one primary school and one kindergarten in each of the two sections, one tele-secondary, and one *video bachillerato* (higher level secondary school taught by video and supervised by a teacher). In addition, there is a very small one-teacher primary school in a remote area where all the children speak the language. The director and teacher is a Spanish-dominant bilingual, but another teacher is a native bilingual. Chichimec teaching is done by four bilingual teachers in the larger schools.

The local government began showing interest in preserving the language around 1995, when a book of Chichimec narratives written by children who had had no previous experience in writing their language was published and distributed. Linguists hired by the educational authorities have taken part in the preparation of teaching materials. The first workbook for the first grade was published in 1996 and revised the following year. Now there is apparently one text for every two grades. I have only been able to examine the one for the first and second grades and a work-book. They show

considerable improvement over the materials published in 1996. They have nice line drawings, the letters are big, and they seem to be adequate pedagogically.

The orthography used is pretty much phonemic. It represents the speech of younger speakers who have practically fused /ü/ and /i/ into /i/, have a limited number of complex vocalic nuclei, and participate in other changes in progress. An effort has been made to represent the contrasts in the language using letters available in typewriters.

6. Chichimec phonemes

Here we present an inventory of the phonemes of the language as spoken by older speakers (Lastra 1984) pointing out changes in progress detected during recent field work. A description of the orthography used in the 2002 workbook is also given, as well as examples of the inconsistencies which manly derive from the existing variation.

The vowels of Chichimeco Jonaz are:

Front unrounded	Front rounded	Central	Back
i	ü		u
e			o
æ			
		a	

They can all occur nasalized, **/ą/**, **/ų/**, and **/į/** seem to be the most frequent ones. They are in contrast with their oral counterparts:

úmąʔą ‘adopted child úmaʔa ‘he remembered’

Consonants are:

Voiceless stops	p	t		k	ʔ
Voiceless affricates		c	č		
Voiced stops	b	d		g	
Fricatives		s			h
Fortis nasals	m	n			
Lenis nasals	m̲	n̲			
Lateral		l			
Vibrant		r			
Semi consonant	w				

In addition, there is high and low tone. I mark high tone with a stress mark on the vowel. It serves to distinguish different words as in /úhó/ 'I lost' : /uhó/ 'cricket' and it may have grammatical consequences as in /kútun/ 'my neck' : /kutún/'your neck'.

Allophones of some consonants are:

/g/ Voiceless velar fricative with labial release [x^w] in final position; its other allophones are [g], stop in initial position and after /n/; [ɤ] elsewhere: [gásа] 'I will win', [káŋga] 'child', [ikáx^w] 'I', [ikáɤós] 'we' (dual inclusive).

/r/ is a flap in initial position and intervocalically, a voiced trill [r] when followed by a /ʔ/ and a voiceless, somewhat assibilated [ř] when followed by /h/ and in final position: [rímóʔ] 'peel', [kúří] 'water', [kářá] 'skunk',[úřha] 'pulque', [rimɛ́ř] 'potato'.

/m̰/ is a bilabial pronounced without the lips coming into contact; it is similar to a voiced bilabial fricative [β], but it is strongly nasalized. [n̰] is a nasalized alveolar flap. These consonants are in contrast with /m/ and /n/ and with /b/ and /r/:

kúmóʔ	'turtle'	kum̰ür	spider
kanú	'my nose'	kun̰í	my heart
karą́	'fly'	min̰á	lime
úbą̱ʔ	'day'	kum̰á	badger

As already mentioned the front rounded high vowel is shifting to an unrounded high vowel. Another change is the elimination of the second vowel of complex vocalic nuclei:

	Old and young speakers	Young speakers
maize	úzihi	úzih
tomorrow	síniʔi	sínʔiʔ

A third change is the loss of /w/ in the cluster /ngw/ as in the word for 'my children': /rungwǽr> /rungǽr/. The cluster of the africate /c/ followed by /ʔ/ is becoming /s/: /etítsʔ/ > /etís/ 'candle'. There are other changes in progress, but they do not seem to have any consequences in the spelling system.

7. Chichimec orthography

We will now discuss how the phonemes are represented in the orthography. Five of the oral vowels are the same as those of Spanish and present no problem. The high front

rounded vowel is ignored; the low front vowel /æ/ is written <e> with a slant line across it; nasalized vowels are underlined.

The consonants /p, t, b, d, g, s, m, n, l, r/ present no problem. The affricate /c/ is written <ts>; the affricate /č/ is written <ch>. Unlike several Mexican languages which adopt the complexities of Spanish orthography (c preceding a, o, u, qu preceding i, e) the voiceless velar stop /k/ is written <k>; the glottal stop is sometimes written with an apostrophe and sometimes with something that looks like a single quotation mark. The velar fricative /x/ (which may or may not be phonemic) is written <j>; <h> is used for aspiration. The lenis nasals /m̰/ and /n̰ / are written <b> and <r> respectively, but are always followed by an underlined nasal vowel. Tone is not written at all.

The question of the spelling of the lenis nasals is an interesting one. Former descriptions of Chichimec phonology (Angulo, 1933; Soustelle, 1937; and Romero, 1957-1958) do not recognize them. They could be analyzed as /b/ (or /m/) and /r/ followed by a nasal vowel if it were not for the fact that /m/, /b/, and /r/ realized as [m], [b], and [r] also occur followed by nasal vowels:

m̰	m	b
ém̰æhæ̰	émą́	ubą́ʔ
‘it is’	‘he says’	‘day’
sím̰ą̰s	nąmę́n	kąbę̰ʔę̰
‘your mat’	‘knee’	‘what’
n̰	n	r
íṉoʔ	kinú́	karą́
‘he’	‘you see’	‘fly’
kuṉí	túną	éręhanʔ
‘my heart’	‘I ate’	‘we bathe’

Furthermore, the realization of the lenis nasals is quite different from that of the fortis ones and most noticeable to a non-native: strongly nasalized bilabial fricative and strongly nasalized flap. If the lenis nasals are considered phonemic, it would not be necessary to mark all of the phonetically nasal vowels, but only those which are not in the environment of a nasal, such as /karą́/ ‘fly’, /(g)ʔíʔę̰/ ‘thus’.

Examples of words which are pronounced one way and written another by the same person are:

Gloss	Pronunciation	Spelling	Comment
day	ṷ́bạ̣ʔ	uba̲	omits glottal stop
big	nándeʔ	nande	omits glottal stop
I	kax^{w}	kauj	writes u for labial release
maize	úzíhi	uzih	writes newer form
tomorrow	síniʔi	siniʔ	writes newer form
your father	úngæ	ungwe/’	writes older form
candle	etís	etits	writes older form
my sash	tasócʔ/tasós	tasoʔts	writes older form inserting a glottal stop before the affricate
you (dual)	ihiékos	ijiekʔos	writes older from
rattle	táchén	tatse̲n	omits aspiration and adds nasalization
thank you	ndi sakharkʔ	ndisakhar	writes newer form omitting second person object -kʔ

To my mind most of the inconsistencies found are due to the changes which the language is undergoing. Some young speakers have almost completed them. Others show considerable fluctuation.

8. Concluding remarks

One of the bilingual teachers I was able to interview explained that the teachers who are the real authors of the texts (in spite of the many contributors mentioned on the first page) have no computer and that the mistakes are introduced in Mexico City when their work is prepared for publication. Subsequently, the children themselves are told what they have to correct which is, of course, a source for further mistakes. It is evident that neither the teachers nor the writers, often the same young people, have no facilities to do proper work. They have, furthermore, received makeshift preparation, and do a remarkably good job considering the circumstances. It is to be hoped that with the new law outlined above proper funding might be allocated and conditions will improve for the teachers and learners of Chichimeco Jonaz as well as those of all the other Indian languages of Mexico.

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