## Doing Mayan linguistics in Guatemala

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Linguists working in Guatemala in recent years have had the benefit of being able to work with an increasingly linguistically sophisticated, politically aware, and culturally concerned population. Mayas have been quite forthright about informing linguists about what they believe to be the proper sort of linguistics to do. In 1985, for instance, a group of Mayas participating in the VIII Mayan Linguistics Workshop in Antigua Guatemala called on linguists 'not to contribute to the internal division of each Mayan language, not to promote or officialize Spanish borrowings in those languages, not to marginalize speakers of Mayan languages in the investigation of their own languages, and not to monopolize or reserve for themselves linguistic methodology and knowledge' (Cojtí Cuxil 1990:3).[1] It was perhaps a shock to some linguists, as it was to me, to realize that good will and good relations with the individual collaborators in our past research, a dedication to sound scientific principles of linguistic research, and even instruction in literacy and linguistics on the part of many of us were not enough to avoid rather severe criticism of our role in Mayan linguistics.

The criticism, which was voiced again even more strongly in the XI Mayan Linguistics Workshop in 1989 in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and which is eloquently (and devastatingly) developed in Cojtí Cuxil 1990, addresses several different issues. First, it assumes that doing linguistics is essentially political. Second, it fundamentally questions some of the tenets that have guided many linguists in research, principally the idea that an adequate description simply reports 'what is there'. Third, it proposes, both explicitly and implicitly, a set of standards and obligations for linguists to follow in their research on minority languages. All of the issues raised are germane to linguistics in general and not just to Mayan linguistics. I will take them in order.[2]

1. THE POLITICS OF LINGUISTIC RESEARCH. Mayas make the point that linguistics is not done in a political vacuum. Someone pays for research, and the

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[1] Translations of quotes from Cojtí Cuxil and of statements from the XI Mayan Linguistics Workshop are mine.

[2] My thinking about these issues is heavily influenced by my work with Mayas over the last twenty years, but especially in the last five years. I have benefitted from many critical conversations with my students, colleagues, and co-researchers. I would especially like to recognize the contributions of the members of the classes Jun Iq' and Jun Ajkem to my thinking on these matters; of my research colleagues Pakal, Saq Ch'en, Nik'te', Waykan, and Saqijix of the group Oxlajuj Kej; and also that of Guillermo Rodríguez Guaján, Demetrio Rodríguez Guaján, Irma Otzoy, Luís Enrique Sam Colop, and Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil. Needless to say, they are not responsible for what I have done with our conversations and would not necessarily agree with me. Cojtí Cuxil's 1990 article, 'Lingüística e idiomas Mayas en Guatemala', is an extraordinarily clear and profound work on the politics of Mayan linguistics. It is the principal publication by a Maya in this field, but it reflects, I think, the thoughts of many other individuals as well.

reasons for funding one kind of research rather than another can be political. The personal motives that linguists have for choosing a research topic and a language or place for doing research are varied and certainly cover nonlinguistic considerations, including political ones. Doing research can affect various local situations, such as language maintenance, language shift, expanding literacy, and increased bilingualism, all of which enter into the local political equations. When linguists are foreigners in their research area, as is the case with the vast majority of Mayan linguists, then the possibility that they represent some foreign governmental position arises. Similarly, because of the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and other missionary groups, foreign linguists are often thought to represent religious interests. Furthermore, the language under investigation is spoken by people who are members of a linguistic community and also a political community. Any research undertaken in that community may affect or be affected by the political status of the group.

At the XI Mayan Linguistics Workshop, in a panel discussion on the role of foreign linguists in Mayan linguistics, a number of the public questions addressed politics directly or indirectly. In particular, Mayas asked about ulterior motives for research: 'Why are foreign linguists interested in Mayan linguistics?' 'What goal does the research done by foreigners have in their own country?' 'The work of the linguists is limited solely to research ... or perhaps they are really working for the politics and ideology of their government.' They also made explicit reference to the political status of Mayan communities in relation to linguistic research: 'Does knowledge of Mayan languages contribute to the subordination of the Mayan population?' 'Is it possible for the foreign linguist to contribute seriously to the total elimination of the distinct tentacles of internal and external colonialism that currently envelops the Maya?'

Many of us have been used to thinking that our work is pure science—that the most compelling reasons for doing linguistics are to know how specific languages work and what language is. The widely accepted Western idea that knowledge in and of itself is valuable for society is often the only justification we need to do what we do. And if the people we work with do not or cannot understand that, it is because they are poor and do not have the luxury of being able to think about the universal benefits of science, or it is because they are uneducated or unsophisticated. The Mayas who spoke at the XI Workshop may be poor, but they are not uneducated nor unsophisticated. What they are saying is that the conduct of social science research, in which category they definitely place linguistics, can have negative or positive consequences for the group where that research is carried out, and that an evaluation of the possible consequences must start with a consideration of the political status of the group in question. In the case of the Mayas of Guatemala, this must take into account that they are a politically subordinated set of communities that have been subject to five hundred years of colonialist policy. Language is part of that policy, for instance in the differential legal and customary statuses accorded to Mayan languages and Spanish. It is also part of the political reality of the communities, indicating at the same time both the autonomous origin of those communities and their current subordinate position (Cojtí Cuxil 1990:4).

Linguists working in Guatemala, then, have the option of doing and presenting their research in a manner that supports the dominant political group, which has an interest in the elimination of Mayan languages or at least in the spread of Spanish, at whatever cost; or in a manner that supports the well-being of Mayan languages. Almost all of our activities, no matter how politically neutral we may consider them, are seen by Guatemalans as falling into one camp or the other. The choices we have do not include neutrality, and are presented quite clearly by Cojtí Cuxil (1990:19):

> 'It is difficult, above all in Guatemala, where Ladino colonialism reigns and where the very Political Constitution assigns informal functions to Mayan languages, for linguists to define themselves as neutral or apolitical, since they work on languages that are sentenced to death and officially demoted. In this country, the linguist who works on Mayan languages only has two options: either active complicity in the prevailing colonialism and linguistic assimilationism, or activism in favor of a new linguistic order in which equality in the rights of all the language is made concrete, something that also implies equal rights for the nationalities and communities.'

2. THE ROLE OF LINGUISTIC RESEARCH. We have been taught to be true to our data, to report it as accurately as we possibly can, and to be as exhaustive as possible in descriptive linguistics and as honest as possible in using descriptive data in theoretical work. We have not been as well drilled in sociolinguistic sensitivity; to be both honest and accurate requires taking the broad social situation into account. Every time we write an article about a language we do several things: we make an analysis of some body of linguistic data, we discuss that analysis in the light of current pertinent theory, we select examples of speech to illustrate our points, and we bring that language into at least momentary prominence according to the analysis, the theory, and the selection of data. Language prominence resulting from linguistic research has many non-linguistic consequences, and selection of data is guided by a multiplicity of nonlinguistic as well as linguistic factors.

Selection of data is a thorny issue. First of all, unless we are native speakers of the language we work on, we automatically select the data that WE KNOW from among the possible set of data. Additionally, we select data that illustrates the point we wish to make. Furthermore, we select a great deal of data that is wholly tangential to the point we wish to make because it accompanies the data that does make the point, and that is the way we elicited or received it. We also select speakers to give us the data we work on, for all sorts of reasons including availability, intelligence, compatibility, age, sex, linguistic ability, community leadership, and so on. And sometimes the result is that the examples we use are disliked by or even offensive to the community we work with. Our defense usually is that they are examples of real language taken from natural language situations, that they are scientifically accurate, and that it would be unethical and unscientific to change them. I do not believe that a request to use additional selection criteria for examples involves an unscientific tampering with the data; it instead is a plea for sensitivity in the presentation of data, and in many cases it is a plea for more accurate reporting of data.

One of the points raised by Mayas in the 1985 workshop was that we should

not promote or officialize Spanish borrowing in Mayan languages. Another point raised was that our choices of example words in paradigms and elsewhere were on occasion infelicitous. Examples given included the choice of 'flea' to illustrate a noun paradigm in one of the workshop papers, and the frequent choice of 'kill' as the paradigmatic transitive verb. The essential point being made here is that choice of examples, especially in minority languages or languages without a grand written literary tradition, does much more than illustrate a linguistic point: it also characterizes a language socially by providing it with an official, scholarly, and WRITTEN personality. Frequently, the only information on a minority language available to the outside is what linguists write about it, since it may have no written and published autochthonous literature. Our seemingly casually chosen examples, representing as they do the most minimal portion of the total language, can quite inadvertently distort the social portrait of the language in question.

Responding to requests to use certain kinds of examples or to refrain from using other kinds of examples is not unethical or unscientific. It simply adds another factor to the myriad of factors that guide us in our choice of examples. If we write a grammar with thirty illustrative sentences containing transitive verbs, and twenty-five of those sentences are about violent actions, it seems reasonable for a speaker to ask why we chose those particular sentences and to wonder whether we were trying to achieve a certain unpleasant portrait of the people who speak the language. It might not be obvious that 'kill' and 'hit' are verbs that lend themselves extremely well to certain kinds of explanations, since they can, among other things, take subjects and objects of any person and number.

Borrowings raise another point. Mayas feel that the high percentage of Spanish borrowing to be found in the speech of some individuals is a sign of political domination and language morbidity. Although we can point to languages (like English) that have survived very nicely a period of accelerated borrowing, the point is certainly valid in that many threatened languages do, in fact, exhibit a high level of borrowing. There are words that are of foreign origin but fully incorporated into a language and that lack an adequate 'native' equivalent, and there are words that are even preferred to their native equivalents. However, there are also speakers, of Mayan languages at least, who use many fewer borrowings than other speakers. We can add that as a factor to consider in our choice of people to give us data on language. Where the borrowings that we collect are not central to the matter under discussion, they can often be changed without damaging the rest of the example. And where we are explicitly discussing borrowing, or have no alternative but to include borrowed words in our examples, Mayas suggest that we discuss and comment critically on the sociolinguistic situations that result in borrowing.

The issue here is not simply one of accommodating to certain isolated requests for changes in our examples. I believe that Mayas are challenging the whole idea of descriptive accuracy, and are suggesting that adequate description must take into account sociolinguistic and political factors as well as linguistic facts. That is, a description of a language provides part of a social

description of the people who speak that language, and the speakers, and hence the language, also exist in a political context. The information that our linguistic descriptions give about social matters should be as accurate as the information they give about linguistic structure; and we must be aware of the political implications of what we write and, in a situation like that of Mayas in Guatemala, consciously take sides in a political confrontation. If we are forced to recognize that a language is of low prestige, or contains a great many foreign borrowings, or is otherwise politically or socially 'weak', then Mayas would have us explain and attack those facts, not merely report them.

We are used to being the arbiters of our own choices, and defend those choices valiantly. We are sometimes offended when others suggest that we must re-examine decisions that seem to us to be purely linguistic and more within our competency than that of any other person. We also tend to regard the languages we work on as personal property, or at the best as public property. Mayas challenge that notion as well: 'Mayan languages are the collective property of their speakers, and it primordially pertains to the speakers to study them and to decide their destiny' (Cojtí Cuxil 1990:20). Mayas not only criticize some of our choices, they also defend their right to do so.

Thus the role of linguistics can be seen as a scholarly role WITHIN a given political and social context. In many cases, this implies working with a SUB-ORDINATE language, which further implies intellectual, scholarly, and political responsibilities to that language and the people who speak it. These responsibilities are not the same as those we have when we work with dominant languages. We are asked, at the very least, to recognize the social and political roles we play and not to pretend that our role is 'purely scientific' and neutral. We are additionally asked, and this is much more difficult for us, to accept that speakers of the languages we work with, not professional linguists except insofar as they coincide, are the ultimate judges of what should or should not be done with their languages.

**3.** THE OBLIGATION OF LINGUISTIC RESEARCH. Many of the comments at the XI Mayan Linguistics Workshop reflected an underlying resentment of foreign, which is to say non-Mayan, control of linguistics. A number of people asked why we publish so much in languages inaccessible to them: 'Why are all the investigations only written in English and you don't leave a copy for the Mayan community in their own languages or in Spanish?' Others questioned our willingness to do linguistics under the control of the speakers: 'Would you be willing to do work in conjunction with Mayan groups or associations, working with them in an equitable manner?' 'If speakers of Mayan languages come to have power over the destiny of Mayan linguistics, would the foreign linguists accept being subject to rules established by the speakers, leaving aside their personal and institutional differences?'

Other criticisms of foreign linguistics that also deal with control include a widespread feeling that we do not do enough to share our specialized knowledge with speakers of Mayan languages. One of the Maya panelists asked the question: 'Do we need foreign linguists?' His answer was: 'Yes, unfortunately.'

However, Mayas are suggesting, more and more frequently, that the proper role of the foreign linguist is to teach speakers of Mayan languages how to do linguistics. This comment is directed not only to descriptive linguists who work on Mayan languages, but to theoretical linguists as well. Those theoreticians who do not have direct contact with communities of speakers of subordinate languages may have thought, up to now, that the matters under discussion do not particularly pertain to them. Mayas believe, however, that at least some speakers of their languages must study linguistics at the highest levels, in order to have real control over Mayan linguistics. This implies, of course, that we may have a responsibility to make sure that our students who are speakers of subordinate languages receive the opportunity for a first-rate linguistic education, even when faced with problems of language, nationality, and formal educational preparation. Because it is so very much more difficult for anyone who is a member of a subordinate language community to reach the point of being ready for university or graduate education in a foreign country, it is an even greater responsibility to nurture those few students who do reach that point. The role in instruction that Mayas ask us to assume is not an easy one. It requires a great amount of unaccustomed effort, time, bureaucratic manipulation, and financial sacrifice.

Given that foreign linguists do control Mayan linguistics so far, our production is not seen as all that wonderful, either. Cojtí Cuxil (1990:21–22) lists among our weaknesses and failures those of: 'Doing partial and simplistic studies of Mayan languages for reasons of economy, ease, preference or incompetence' and 'Reflecting incompletely the lexical repertory of each of the Mayan languages.' How many of us have been dismayed on hearing someone assure us that language X (in my case it was Quechua) is a primitive language, since we try so hard to dispel the notion of 'primitive' languages? I was much more dismayed to discover that, in the Quechua instance, the person had a seemingly legitimate reason for his idea: that there are only 5,000 words in some dictionary of the language. And who was responsible for writing the dictionary? Worse yet, I have heard a number of linguists claim that we should not have anything to do with prescriptive grammars, tainted as they are by linguistic impurity and incomplete description. Prescriptive grammars are NECESSARY for developing literacy, and if linguists refuse to involve themselves in writing them or teaching people how to write them, they are bound to be, unnecessarily, linguistically inaccurate.

I believe that our obligations can be subsumed under four major areas:

(1) Recognizing the political and social context for our research and, where necessary, taking the part of the language we study and its speakers.

(2) Recognizing the rights of speakers of politically subordinate languages over those languages, and paying attention to their expressed wishes for the public presentation of facts about their languages.

(3) Contributing to the training of linguists who are speakers of subordinate languages, at every level from the empirical to the theoretical.

(4) Publishing descriptions and analyses of the languages we work on that

are of the highest possible quality, and making those publications available to speakers of the language.

How to meet our obligation depends on the specific situation in which we work. The particular contexts for each language differ significantly. It seems to me that what Mayas are suggesting is applicable to a much wider set of languages around the world, however, and that we can all benefit from reflecting on their comments in the light of our own research experiences. Trying to meet the challenges they pose can be extraordinarily rewarding as well, and, when all is said and done, leads to better linguistics.

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## Language endangerment and the human value of linguistic diversity

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Linguists typically celebrate the tension that plays between two realities of human linguistic knowledge, universality and diversity. But linguistic diversity is not something whose future can be taken for granted. Many local languages and cultures find themselves in great peril in this era, a fact well documented elsewhere in this collection.

In the following paragraphs I will be concerned with the idea that linguistic diversity is important to human intellectual life—not only in the context of scientific linguistic inquiry, but also in relation to the class of human activities belonging to the realms of culture and art.

From the perspective of linguistic science, arguments for safeguarding the world's linguistic diversity require no special discussion in this journal. Suppose English were the only language available as a basis for the study of general human grammatical competence. We know enough about the latter to be able to say now that we could learn a great deal about it from English alone. But we also know enough about linguistic diversity to know that we would miss an enormous amount.

If English were the only language, we could learn a lot about the fundamental principles of grammar, but we could only guess at the nature of that which can vary, except to the extent that this is evident from the varieties of English itself. And this would amount to missing an important point of human linguistic competence. By itself, English would supply a mere hint of the complexity of the system of principles and parameters which permits content questions to be formed either by movement (as in English) or by retention of the question word in situ (Japanese, and English in multiple questions). Considering just English, the category of number—as represented in *cat* vs. *cats*—tells us little about the opposition involved. Only the especially curious might wonder whether the theory of grammar defines the number contrast as [ ± singular] or as [ ± plural]. And where English is the only language, this is probably a meaningless ques-