

# Identity and Assimilation in the Missionary Representation of Nahuatl

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This paper examines the representation of Nahuatl in missionary linguistic work from New Spain within a social context and traces a growing personal identification with the language on the part of the authors of these works. This is achieved through a careful analysis of authors' comments about the social status and relative merits of Nahuatl, as well as their comparisons of Nahuatl with Latin, Castilian, and other indigenous languages. This identification is shown to be, in part, a reaction to language policies dictated by the Spanish Crown that lessened the importance of the study of indigenous languages and thus also the standing of *criollo* priests and missionaries.

The study also situates the attitudes expressed by missionary linguists within the larger question of linguistic identity and linguistic appropriation. Semiotician and cultural critic Walter Mignolo has characterized the colonial study of indigenous languages as "the actions taken and strategies employed by missionaries and men of letters to (re)organize Amerindian speech by writing grammars" (1992:304) and asserts that these languages were "not only re-arranged but also possessed and assimilated" (1992:305) in the process. I will examine the merits of this assertion and explore the complexity of authority, identity and ownership of indigenous languages. This is an issue with modern-day resonance, as questions still arise between linguists and indigenous peoples over representation, ownership and publication of materials about their languages.

The primary sources analyzed are the Nahuatl grammars of Molina (1571), Rincon (1595), Vetancurt (1673), Vazquez Gastelu (1689), Tapia Centeno (1753), Aldama y Guevara (1754), Aquino Cortes y Zedeño (1765) and Sandoval (1810) as well as Molina's *Confessionario Mayor* of 1578. Work on other languages, including Cordova's 1578 Zapotec dictionary and Neve y Molina's 1767 grammar and dictionary of Otomí, were also consulted in order to compare comments about Nahuatl to comments about other indigenous languages during the same period.

## References

Mignolo, Walter. 1992. The Colonization of Amerindian Languages. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34:2, 301–330