

Sins and Crimes: Zapotec-Spanish Translation from Catholic Evangelization to Colonial Law (Oaxaca, Mexico)

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Throughout New Spain, missionary friars with the cooperation of indigenous elites alphabetized indigenous languages as a means of facilitating evangelization. Alphabetic writing allowed the friars – with the collaboration of indigenous elites as linguistic informants – to produce catechisms, sermons, and *doctrinas*, which they and their indigenous assistants put to use for the purposes of conversion. Alphabetic writing also equipped a stratum of the indigenous elite with the tools to govern Spanish-style municipalities (*pueblos de indios*). Indigenous scribes acting on behalf of their municipal councils assiduously recorded official business, including the keeping of the accounts of the municipal treasury, the administration of local justice, and the creation of last wills and testaments of town residents. Indigenous litigants often submitted these documents to Spanish courts as evidence in a range of civil and criminal cases. A court interpreter made them intelligible to the Spanish magistrate by translating the documents from indigenous languages into Spanish. Translation thus provided the scaffolding for an “empire of Christianity” and an “empire of law,” two institutions that made Spanish colonialism in the Americas so durable. In what ways, though, was translation within these two spheres mutually reinforcing?

Our objective in this paper is to examine translation at the interface of the evangelical, municipal, and juridical realms in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca (Mexico) during the colonial period. We hypothesize that translation of Christian doctrine into written Zapotec facilitated the construction of colonial juridical discourse and its appropriation by Zapotec municipal authorities and their scribes. Through analysis of

- bilingual Zapotec-Spanish catechisms such as *Doctrina Christiana en lengua Zapoteca Nexitza* (1687) authored by Fray Francisco Pacheco de Silva (a parish priest and Dominican Friar)
- Zapotec language *memorias de cabildo* (records written by indigenous municipal councils) submitted as legal evidence to the district court of Villa Atla, Oaxaca and their Spanish translations provided by the court interpreter

we will a) chart a communicative network of Dominican friars (some of whom were parish priests), Zapotec municipal authorities, and Spanish and mestizo court functionaries who through translation facilitated the interaction of Zapotec individuals and groups with the colonial legal system, and b) examine how certain Zapotec terms came to serve as rich semantic fields for translation, from their origination in the Catholic evangelical enterprise to their migration to the local administrative and legal realms.

In order to substantiate our hypothesis, we have chosen three Zapotec terms that appear with frequency and carry a heavy semantic burden in the documentation, and which we will subject to linguistic analysis: *xihui*, *tzahui*, and *xibaa*. As we analyze these terms, we will:

1. provide information about the historical context of the documentation in which they appear, honing in on how the terms were translated and the role of interpreters in the translation process
2. trace the history and migration of these terms through missionary dictionaries, *doctrinas*, and catechisms in different variants and communicative spaces of Zapotec and through documents written in the context of local administration and the colonial legal system
3. submit the terms to a semantic analysis, including
 - the context of colonial/local discourse traditions and their immediate context and co-text
 - the *translations* from Spanish to Zapotec to Spanish performed by missionaries and interpreters
 - translation strategies

We bring to our analysis a conception of translation as practice in a certain space of translation, as verbal (re-)construction and modification of reality, and as a practice of transculturation. Translation as practice and process is therefore as much socio-linguistic as it is historical. For these reasons we conceive of our research in interdisciplinary terms, and propose that interdisciplinary work along these lines could reveal how translation shaped colonial institutions, culture, and inter-ethnic relations over time.

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