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THE USE OF LANGUAGES' NAMES:
THE MAYAN CASE

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Mayas in Guatemala have established official names and spellings for their languages. While the decision to use these names by academics is a matter of personal choice, I point out that such decisions have political effects and an impact on issues of social and linguistic legitimacy in minority communities.

[KEYWORDS: language politics, language names, Mayan languages]

Over the past 30 years, a great deal of linguistic research has been done on Mayan languages, mostly on grammar. However, some has also focused on language revitalization, preservation, and teaching linguistics to native speakers. Institutions like the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), the Catholic church, the Guatemalan government, etc., have trained people to write their languages for varying purposes (such as conversion, castilianization, reading the Bible). Other institutions working on linguistics in Guatemala and which are directed by Mayas trained in linguistics or related fields include the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM), the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala (ALMG), Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib' (OKMA), and the Universidad Rafael Landívar. It is relevant to point out that most of these organizations have been created and are supported by linguists from outside the area.

The work done by these organizations has contributed in one way or another to the revitalization and preservation of Mayan languages. They have influenced language ideology and identity in Guatemala and have contributed to the officialization of the alphabet for Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala, proposals for the officialization of indigenous languages in Guatemala, the creation of different kinds of grammars, teaching materials, proposals for standardization, dictionaries, and so on. From this standpoint, I would like to discuss the use of the "proper" names of Mayan languages, a discussion I believe can be generalized to other indigenous languages in Latin America. This is part of a broader issue of the relationship between indigenous communities and academics or organizations.

The names for Mayan languages by now are well established and widely used in the communities and organizations in Guatemala. While there are some problematic names that have created discussion among speakers,

Mayan institutions, and scholars (see OKMA 2001:32–36 and Mateo Toledo 1999 for specifics), the standard spelling and “official” names for Mayan languages became more or less well established, among Mayas, in the 1990s.¹ This change replaced old spellings and improper writing of language names with spellings in the official alphabet; but these new spellings are not always followed as expected. On the one hand, some organizations and linguists (and scholars from other fields) have taken a conservative position on this issue and do not use the new spellings. For example, one finds titles of recent articles, books, and dissertations that use Quiché or Kiche, Cakchikel, Cakchiquel, or Kakchikel, Jakalteko, Kekchi, etc., instead of K’ich(e)’, Kaqchikel, Popti’,² and Q’eqchi’, respectively. On the other hand, many organizations and scholars do use the standardized names. This obviously reflects different political views about indigenous languages and communities.

This may seem to be a trivial issue about “correct” vs. “incorrect” spelling of language names. Does it really make a difference which spelling is used? And why do some linguists and organizations not use the “official” names of the languages? I do not address these questions in detail here, but let me simply point out some relevant issues. First, the “official names” are the result of a long period of work and struggle for language revitalization and recognition, self-definition, and definition of linguistic identity. So failing to use these names in some way undermines these efforts. Second, most of the projects that are carried out by the government or other institutions rely on what has been done by professionals and organizations outside of the country and certainly outside the Maya communities. Consequently, proposals from Mayan scholars and organizations have less effect and power to influence these projects. As a result, the conservative position further disqualifies Mayan efforts. In some cases, it also creates unnecessary discussion and division among speakers of the same languages (see Sis Iboy 1991; 2000 for details on the Achi case). Third, since any professional work informs outsiders about the languages and the people who use them, the “improper” spellings misrepresent these communities. This raises the question of whether linguists should abide by political decisions on how communities define their languages. On the one hand, I believe this is a question of personal choice. Certainly we, as linguists, are not obliged to follow whatever a community defines. On the other hand, linguistic research has an effect on minority languages because it is one of the few public representations of the languages. Due to the complexity of this point, divergences of opinions and

¹ I use “official names” to refer to what Mayas agree to call their languages and the spelling they use.

² The name Popti’ was decided on in a meeting that took place in Jacaltenango. One of the arguments against Jakalteko is that it refers to people from Jacaltenango and thus misrepresents the linguistic community, since not all speakers are from Jacaltenango.

positions arise, and it is not always easy to decide what to do. However, whatever decision is taken has a political effect, which must be considered as well.

Let me address the point of how the result of our work as linguists influences political issues in indigenous communities. If I misspell the name *English*, no doubt this will be taken as a simple problem of lack of education or knowledge of the language without further effects on any political issue related to the language. However, this is not the case for indigenous languages, due to their obvious political, economic, and social differences. Most community leaders lack the academic background, authority, and power to contradict misrepresentations of their languages. They often lack access to the same public information resources academics use. Obviously, under these circumstances, any academic work has great influence on shaping social and political issues within minority communities, and more critically in communities where the future of the language is uncertain.

To conclude, I would like to point out that the use of the official names for languages falls within a more general question about how academics and organizations reshape and support identities and ideologies in favor of or against minority communities, even when their research is not explicitly designed for this purpose. I am not claiming that scholars and organizations are responsible for all the ways the results of their work are used, but I am questioning why some academics and organizations oppose community decisions, because these academic practices may negatively affect Mayan languages. Indeed, as a native speaker of one of these languages, I find it disrespectful that some scholars and organizations do not observe the way we define ourselves and how we wish to name our languages.

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