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Anochipa tl̄p̄c̄. çan achica ye nican ohuaye ohuaye,
Tel ca chalchihuitl noxamani noteocuitlatl in
tlapani oo quetzalli poztequi ya hui ohuaye,
ānochipa tl̄p̄c̄. çan achica ye nican ohuaya
ohuaya

The Characteristics of a Nahuatl Lingua Franca*

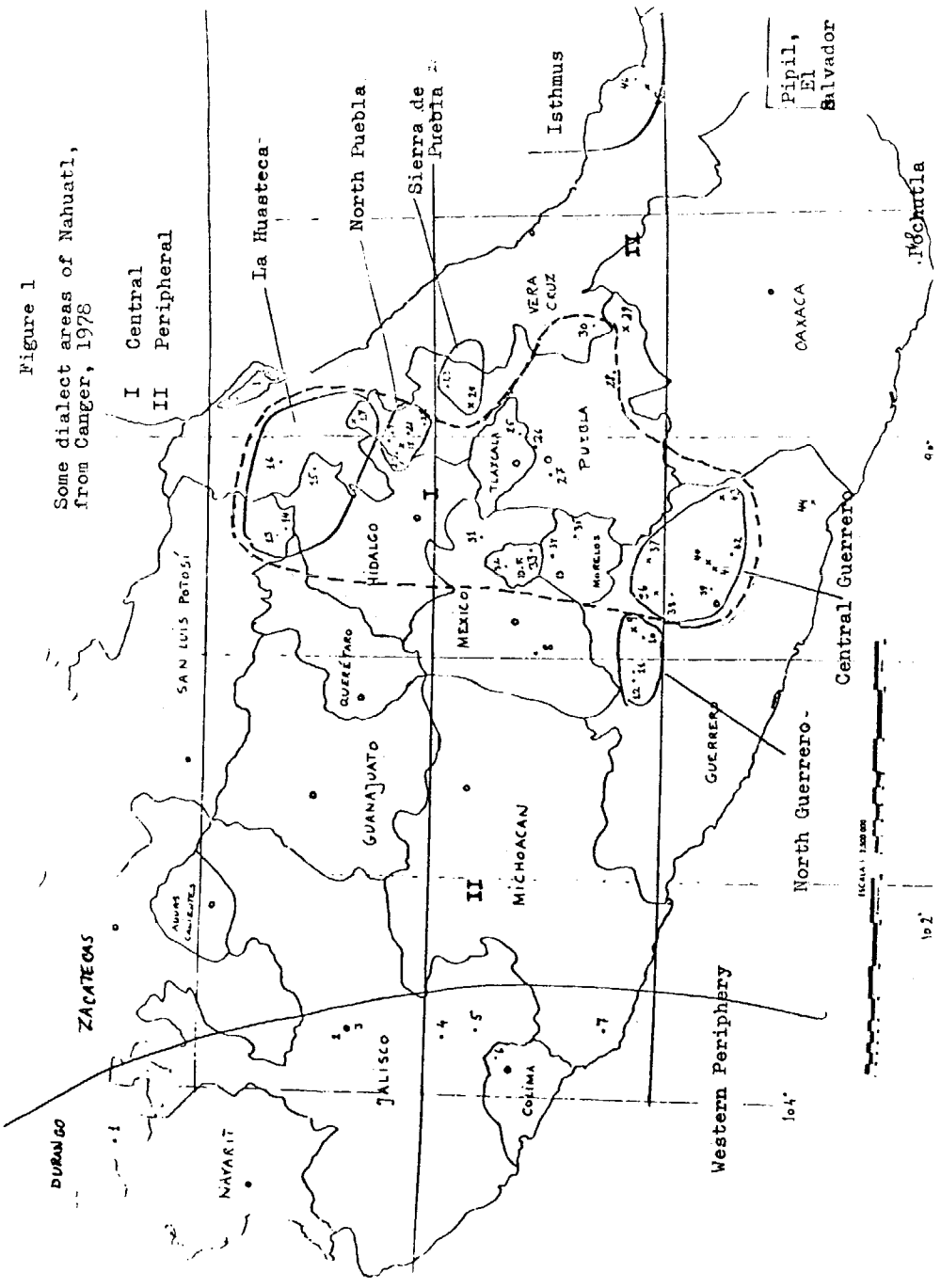
Karen Dakin

Nahuatl played an important role as a language of communication or lingua franca in dealings between different Indian groups throughout the Aztec empire and its subsidiaries in the pre-Hispanic period. Carlos Navarrete (personal communication) suggests that it may have served this purpose even before the Aztecs, dating from an earlier period when there were first Nahuatl-speaking merchants travelling along the Mesoamerican trade routes, merchants who were the predecessors of the more political Aztec pochtecas. Heath (1972), Karttunen and Lockhart (1976), and others have documented how the Indian language functioned as a lingua franca for the Spaniards also during the early colonial period, when they used it for administration in many parts of New Spain.

The focus of this paper is on the Nahuatl used in twenty-one letters that were sent to Philip II about 1572 from the towns surrounding Santiago de Guatemala, today known as Antigua.¹ First, I want to place the Nahuatl in which the letters are written in relation both to Pipil and other nearby Nahuatl dialects of southern Mexico and Central America, and to more centrally-located varieties, including Classical Nahuatl, the language spoken in Tenochtitlan in the sixteenth century and described by Spanish grammarians. After doing that, I will point out some of the inferences that can be drawn from that relationship in regard to the existence of what may have been a fairly wide-spread standardized form of Nahuatl that served as the lingua franca.

Nahuatl-speaking communities, at the time of the Spanish conquest, were spread from Durango and Jalisco in the north of Mexico to Nicaragua in Central America, encompassing a number of dialect areas. Canger (1978, 1980), whose general classification is the most complete, separates the extinct Pochutec dialect of Oaxaca off

Figure 1
Some dialect areas of Nahuatl,
from Canger, 1978



from General Aztec, and describes two major groupings under the latter branch, a central one with its nucleus in Tenochtitlan, and a periphery that can be broken into western and eastern divisions. Pipil, the group of dialects spoken by the early migrations of Nahuatl-speakers to Central America about the tenth century A.D., belongs to the eastern one. It is necessary to keep this classification in mind as background for the rest of the paper. A map is given in Figure 1.

Since the letters are from colonial Guatemala, they could have been written in any one of several possible dialects and been produced by any of a number of different groups. Were the authors Pipil-speakers, natives of the area? Or Tlaxcalans and others from Central Mexico who had accompanied Pedro de Alvarado on his conquest of Guatemala in 1524? Or were they speakers of the Mayan languages in the area, Cakchiquel, Pocomam and Quiche? They would have used Nahuatl, following the pre-Hispanic pattern, because there were few in their villages who knew Spanish, so that the Indian administrative language was more accessible.

It is easy to discard the first possibility, or at least to say that the dialect used in the letters is not Pipil (since, of course, there is always the logical possibility that Pipil-speakers wrote the documents in a non-native dialect). For comparison, I was fortunate to find a short seventeenth-century Pipil text published by Rivas (1969:87-91); in addition, I used several descriptions of modern dialects (Aráuz 1960; Campbell 1975; Maxwell et al n.d.; Rivas 1969; Schultze-Jena 1935; Todd 1953). The examples given for Izalco Pipil come from Schultze-Jena (1935). Other dialects closely-related to Pipil that are mentioned in the comparison are Mecayapan (Wolgemuth n.d.) and Pajapan (García de León 1976).

There are at least six points on which the Nahuatl of the letters differs from Pipil, showing instead the usage of Classical Nahuatl and other central dialects.

First, in the letters, there is no written plural suffix on the verbs following the tense-aspect marker. In Classical Nahuatl, as described by Carochi (1645), -? indicated plural. However, generally in colonial orthography, a final ? (or h, depending on the dialect) was not written. For this reason, it seems likely that -? or -h was the plural morpheme in the letters. In contrast, Pipil has -t. The -t is a retention of the Proto-Nahuatl marker *-ti that became *-t word-finally. In all other dialects, except Pochutec, the *-t changed to -h or -?, disappeared completely, or was replaced by some other unrelated marker. Thus, the Nahuatl of the letters represents a dialect within an area of innovation that includes the Classical dialect, while Pipil remains outside of it. Examples from Classical Nahuatl (drawn from Carochi), the letters, the Pipil document, and the modern Izalco dialect are given under (1).

- (1) Classical Nahuatl: titlapōhuá 'we count'
(? indicates ?)

Letters: otechcalactique 'they made us enter'
(? indicates probable ?)

Pipil document: calaquisquet 'they will enter'

Izalco: timuk^wepat 'we return'

The second and third features that distinguish the Nahuatl used in the letters from Pipil are the sets of the singular and plural independent pronouns. In the letters, the singular forms show the fronting of Proto-Nahuatl *a to e; this innovation also occurred in Classical Nahuatl and most other central dialects, as well as in a number of peripheral dialects. Although the only singular pronouns in the Pipil document, neguantin and yeguat, have e also, these may represent external influence, since neguantin is aberrant in any case because of the -tin plural marker on a singu-

lar pronoun. According to Judith Maxwell (personal communication), many Pipil colonial documents show some such influence by the lingua franca and Classical dialects. In any event, all modern Pipil dialects retain the *a in this set of pronouns. Here again, then, the Nahuatl used in the letters shares an innovative trait with Classical Nahuatl and other central dialects, while Pipil retains the more archaic one.

(2) Singular pronouns:

Classical Nahuatl: nehuātl 'I'; yehuātl 'he'

Letters: nevatl, nehuat 'I'; yeuatl 'he'

Pipil document: neguantin 'I'; yeguat 'he'

Izalco: naha, naa 'I'; yaha, yaa 'he'

The plural pronouns in the letters take the compound suffix -n-ti(n), as in tevantin 'we'. This is the Classical Nahuatl formation also. Although the one plural pronoun found in the Pipil document has the -n-tin suffix, yeguantin 'they', modern Pipil dialects take -me-t.

(3) Plural pronouns:

Classical Nahuatl: tehuan, tehuantin 'we'; yehuan, yehuantin 'they'

Letters: tevantin, teuanti 'we'

Pipil document: yeguantin 'they'

Izalco: tehemet, temet 'we'; yehemet, yemet 'they'

The fourth feature in which the Nahuatl of the letters differs from Pipil is the use of the honorific verb forms. In the central area especially, a system for marking respect was developed using applicative and reflexive affixes. The letters include numerous examples of such honorifics, but none appear in the Pipil document. Modern Pipil dialects, like the majority of peripheral dialects, do not have honorific systems.

(4) Honorific verb forms:

Classical Nahuatl: motlachieltitica 'he (H) looks on'; motlatocatilia 'he (H) governs'

Letters: mitzmochicaviliz 'he (H) will make you strong'

The introduction of the honorific systems in the central dialects is an innovation probably related to the more hierarchical social structure of Tenochtitlan. Note that in this case also, the Nahuatl of the letters shares an innovation with Classical Nahuatl, while Pipil does not.

A fifth point of difference concerns the position of the adverbial particle ya. In the letters, as in the central area, the ya (or ye, as in Classical Nahuatl) precedes the verb. In the Isthmus and Pipil dialects, the particle comes after the verb. If the ya particle is cognate with the -ya suffix that appears in the imperfect and conditional tense-aspects, then it is probable that the older position is the post-verb one. Again, then, the dialect of the letters shares an innovation with the central area, while Pipil retains the older feature.

(5) Position of ya:

Classical Nahuatl: ye huītz 'he is coming'

Letters: ya ticmomachitia 'now you (H) will know'

Pipil document: yanitena 'now I complain'

Izalco: niknúcatuyá-ya 'I already would be calling'

Mecayapan: tisiaa-ya 'she was grinding' (from /tisi-ya-ya/)

Finally, in one case Pipil shows an innovation that was not shared by the Nahuatl of the letters nor by Classical Nahuatl and other dialects of the central area. Campbell and Langacker (1978) and Canger (1978), modifying the original work of Whorf (1937), note that Proto-Nahuatl *λ, derived by a change in Proto-Uto-Aztecan **t before **a, became t again in a number of Nahuatl dialects, including Pipil. The Nahuatl of the letters, however, retains λ, as does the Classical dialect. The Pipil document has t.

(6) Retention of λ versus t:

Classical Nahuatl: tlācatl 'man'

Letters: tlaoli 'corn'; icnotlaca 'poor men'

Pipil document: tacat 'man'

Izalco: tagat 'man'

To be fair in the presentation of the evidence, I should note that there are two points on which the Nahuatl of the letters sometimes follows Pipil and Mecayapan, rather than Classical and the central area. The first is that the absolute suffix -li occasionally is dropped on words with multisyllabic stems or monosyllabic stems with a long vowel. In Pipil, the suffix was lost in all of these cases, while in Mecayapan it dropped after multisyllabic stems only. Probably because of the influence of the lingua franca and

Classical Nahuatl, the Pipil document forms retain -li.

(7) Retention versus loss of -li absolute suffix:

Classical Nahuatl: tlālli 'land'; tonalli 'day'

Letters: tamal, tamali 'tamale'; taoli 'corn', yepoval '60'

Pipil document: tunali 'day'; unpuali '40', senpuali '20'

Izalco: túnal 'day'; támam 'tamale', tal 'land'

Mecayapan: aačiil 'large green chili'

The Nahuatl of the letters appears to share a second feature with Mecayapan and Pajapan and the Pipil document, although not with modern Pipil dialects. The particle ayak, which is the negative pronoun for 'no one' in central and some peripheral dialects, is used for clause-level negation in most instances, instead of amo, the particle used in the central area. In Mecayapan and Pajapan, the forms ayáa? and ayá, respectively, function in the same way. If they are cognate with ayak, then the feature is shared. In the Pipil document, aya and ayac are found.

(8) Clause-level negation:

Classical Nahuatl: ayac 'no one'; amo 'no'

Letters: ayac 'no', amo 'no'

Pipil document: aya, ayac 'no'

Mecayapan: ayáa? 'no'; ayagah 'no one'

Pajapan: ayá 'no'

Izalco: n_{te} 'no'; aya 'no one'

Thus, there are some ties to the Isthmus and Pipil dialect area. However, on the basis of the greater number of differences that were described first, one can conclude that the dialect in the letters is not Pipil.

The second possibility for authorship is that the letters were written by the descendents of Nahuatl-speakers who came with Alvarado. According to historians, the majority of these people were from Tlaxcala. Sullivan (in press), on the basis of all the documents in the State Archives of Tlaxcala, describes the salient features of that dialect that contrast with Classical Nahuatl. The Nahuatl of the letters is like Classical Nahuatl on all points. For example, in the letters mochi is used for 'all', as in Classical Nahuatl. In the Tlaxcalan documents, only nochi is found. Sullivan notes the use of a -qui suffix on some third-person singular perfect forms, a suffix found in other present-day Tlaxcalan dialects also. The -qui does not occur in the letters. For these reasons, it seems doubtful that Tlaxcalans were responsible for the Guatemalan documents.

However, the possibility that the authors were descendents of Nahuatl-speakers accompanying Alvarado who came from Xochimilco and other areas close to Tenochtitlán has to be considered also. In fact, the first letter is written in a dialect that does not differ from Classical Nahuatl at all, and should be attributed to a scribe of Mexican descent. However, the language of the remaining twenty letters, signed by others than the man who wrote the first letter, contrasts with the Classical dialect in several ways. Although at first examination, these letters appear to be written in a Classical Nahuatl full of 'mistakes' or irregularities, it soon becomes clear that, excepting a few genuine mistakes, many of the irregularities follow a pattern. These can be summarized as

follows.

First, the Nahuatl of the letters only very sporadically and in a limited number of verbs exhibits the vowel-dropping in the perfect formation that occurs in Classical Nahuatl. In most cases, the vowel is retained and no suffix is added in the singular, although the -que tense-aspect marker is present in the plural forms. The contrast can be seen in the following examples:

(9) Vowel-loss versus vowel-retention in perfect forms:

Classical Nahuatl: oquīz 'she went out' (from *oo-kiisa-ka)

First letter (Classical dialect): oquichiu_h 'he did it' (from *o:-ki-čiiwa-ka)

Other letters: opaqui 'he became happy' (from *oo-paki-ka); opolivi 'he perished' (from *oo-poli-wi-ka)

Second, the Nahuatl of the letters does not show the metathesis of w and l identified by Canger (1978; 1980:118-131) as occurring in Classical Nahuatl and nearby central dialects in the formation of the applicative of verbs derived in *-wa. Unfortunately, this conclusion is drawn on the basis of the only example that is found in the letters, and the verb in question is irregular, (i)wi-lia 'to say to'. With the metathesis, the form becomes -ilwia. Compare the forms from Classical Nahuatl with those of the letters, in which both the unmetathesized and metathesized stems are found:

(10) Presence versus absence of metathesis of -w- and -l-:

Classical Nahuatl: ilhuia 'to say' (-l-w-)

First letter (Classical dialect): tiquimilvia 'we

tell him' (-l-w-)

Other letters: otechuilique 'they told us' (-w-l-);
techilvigue 'they told us' (-l-w-)

A third difference between the Nahuatl of the letters and Classical Nahuatl is in the formation of the reflexive for first person plural. Although there is some variation in the forms in the letters, the most frequent is ti-mo-. In Classical Nahuatl, the m of the reflexive prefix assimilated to the consonant of the subject prefix, giving ti-to-. (The m also assimilated to n in the first person singular, but there are no cases of first person singular in the letters with which to compare it).

(11) Reflexive forms:

Classical Nahuatl: tito-

First letter (Classical dialect): tito-

Other letters: timo-; a few cases of tito-

The fourth difference between the Nahuatl of the letters and the Classical dialect is the form of the adverbial particle ya discussed earlier in terms of its syntactic position. The particle reconstructs as *ya in Proto-Nahuatl, and is retained as such in the letters. However, in Classical Nahuatl it has changed to ye.

Because of the evidence given, it does not seem probable that the scribes were descendents of the Mexicans who came with Alvarado either, since they would have used the Classical forms.

Is it likely, then, that the letters were written in a Nahuatl lingua franca by Mayan-language speakers? They do contain a number of usages that can only be described as mistakes because they occur randomly and do not fit into the general dialect picture of Na-

huatl. In most cases, the errors are of the kind that could easily be made by Mayan-language speakers, given the differences in linguistic structure. For example, tl only occurs in certain onomatopoeic words in Mayan languages; in Cakchiquel it is in initial position in such cases. In Nahuatl, of course, tl is found initially, medially, and finally. tl and t are confused in the letters in many instances, as though the writers knew that the tl existed, but were not certain as to where, much the way an English-speaker might confuse flap r and vibrant r̄ in Spanish. Another mistake that occurs several times is that the scribe left off the suffix marking third-person plural perfect on a verb form. In Cakchiquel, plural is a category marked only optionally for third-person. Similar errors are found in the formation of possessed nouns. Unlike Nahuatl, in which nouns drop an absolutive suffix when possessed and in some cases add a possessive suffix, nouns in Mayan languages undergo no such changes. In the letters, some possessed nouns are found with the absolutive suffix; others appear without the absolutive, but also lacking the required possessive suffix. The kinds of mistakes described, all more possible in terms of Mayan linguistic structure, lend credibility to the suggestion that the letters were written by Mayan-language speakers.

In conclusion, I want to talk about the inferences that can be drawn about the language of the letters. I think that the dialect is clearly central. The fact that it shares several features with Classical Nahuatl that are different in Pipil strongly supports this hypothesis. How, then, should the differences with the Classical dialect be viewed?

The lingua franca was probably a direct predecessor of the Classical sixteenth century dialect. The travelling merchants from Tenochtitlan who spoke it established the language along their trade routes early on, although a precise date cannot be given. If the differences between the language of the twenty letters not in the Classical dialect and the latter are reviewed, it is notable

that in each case, the letters have the older form, while Classical Nahuatl shows an innovation. Apparently, these innovations were introduced in Tenochtitlan subsequent to the standardization, if it can be called that, of the lingua franca. This interpretation is based on Canger's (1978, 1980) observation that Tenochtitlan was important as a center of innovation in the formation of dialect groupings. She argues her point specifically in terms of the distribution of the vowel-loss in the perfect formation and the metathesis in the applicatives of -wa verbs described earlier. The distribution of both these innovative traits is limited to the central area, pointing directly to their Classical Nahuatl source. The changes in the reflexive prefixes and in the *ya particle share the same distribution, according to Lastra's (n.d.) maps.

One last interesting fact also suggests that the lingua franca is an archaic form of the language. There are two examples from the class of nouns in Nahuatl that reconstruct with a Proto-Nahuatl absolutive suffix *-m (Dakin 1978; in press), the word for 'chicken' and that for 'reed'. These reconstruct as *tootooli-m and *toli-m. In all dialects except for Pochutec, the final *-m has gone to -n, giving tootoolin and tolin. However, in the letters, although totolin does occur, the main forms of the words used are totolim and tulim.

My conclusions about the lingua franca may seem too sweeping, since they were drawn basically from the limited corpus of the letters. However, examination of the Nahuatl used in a series of documents from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from Chiapas (Reyes 1961) revealed that the language in which these were written was also the lingua franca described. Unfortunately, it is difficult to locate texts from other remote parts of the Aztec empire that might be written in the same standardized archaic form. Most documents from the central area are in Classical Nahuatl, while the few I have seen from the western periphery either are in the western dialect, such as those published in Beyond the Codices (Anderson et al 1976), or else, as is the case of documents from

Nombre de Dios, Durango (Barlow 1953), they are directly attributable to post-Conquest immigrants from the central area.

NOTES

*In a casual conversation we had about four years ago, Fernando Horcasitas remarked that he thought that many Nahuatl documents were written in a dialect that was not Classical, but that he could not identify it. His observation started me off on the analysis presented here. For that reason, it seems appropriate to include it in the volume dedicated to his memory. I most regret that he is no longer here to ask for his opinion, criticisms, and more suggestions.

¹The documents were located by Chris Lutz in the Sevillian Archives, and are in preparation for publication (Dakin and Lutz, in preparation).

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