

Reconstructing historical sociolinguistic contact landscapes: Assessing metalinguistic evidence from Mexico-Tenochtitlan (1524-1630)

A prominent goal of historical sociolinguistic approaches to contact environments is to reconstruct the local sociolinguistic landscape (Trudgill 2011), usually as a step towards the sociohistorical study of the consequences of contact. This reconstruction usually involves not only identifying the languages (or varieties) in contact, but also the ethnolinguistic demographics of the contact environment, the social values of each of the varieties and, when possible, the attitudes or belief systems about the use of specific varieties and their connection to other ideological systems in the sociolinguistic context in question.

Metalinguistic discourse (Krogull and Rutten 2021) is often treated as a valuable tool in this reconstruction, both because it offers real-time observations of the contact environment and because it provides access to contemporary discourses on language use. At the same time, it may be biased in favor of the observers' perspective, and its *representativeness* and *validity* cannot be taken for granted (Schneider 2004). Historical sociolinguists, therefore, must assess metalinguistic evidence on both counts: how representative it is (i.e., whose linguistic practices are being commented on) and how valid it is (i.e., how reliable as a sociolinguistic representation the record is). Whenever other more direct forms of sociolinguistic evidence are available (for instance, audio recordings, Gordon 1998), this assessment may be feasible. For many sociohistorical contexts, however, this kind of evidence is lacking.

In this presentation, I will share results from an ongoing study of sociolinguistic commentary in a Spanish colonial corpus consisting of the minutes ('actas') from the Cabildo (city council) of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. The *cabildo* was institutionally and socially significant as the most important local government body in the colonial history of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, in an area of intense contact between Spanish and several indigenous languages, most notably Nahuatl. The materials in this study correspond to the years 1524-1630 (27 volumes, ca. 2,300,000 words). A preliminary study (Elvins and Sanz-Sánchez 2022) revealed various types of lexical items around which metalinguistic observations cluster in this corpus (e.g., *india/o* 'Indian-FEM/MASC', *negra/o* 'Black (slave)-FEM/MASC', *español/a* 'Spaniard-FEM/MASC', *lengua* 'interpreter', *lengua mexicana* 'Mexican/Nahuatl language', *naguatlato* 'Nahuatl interpreter-MASC'). Here, I build on this previous study to report on all the metalinguistic observations that occur in association with these lexical items across the whole corpus. After classifying metalinguistic observations thematically into five main areas (i.e., sociolinguistic contexts of language use; degrees of bilingualism; types of bilingual proficiency; strategic need for specific languages; and attitudes towards bilingualism), I assess the representativeness and the validity of these observations by triangulating them with two sources of information external to the corpus: a linguistic one (patterns of incorporation of Spanish loanwords in Nahuatl texts from central Mexico, as reported in Karttunen and Lockhart 1976 and Lockhart 1992) and a sociological one (marriage data for Mexico-Tenochtitlan parishes, as reported by Schwaller 2016).

The analysis reveals coincidences but also important differences between the metalinguistic comments and the auxiliary sources: while the metalinguistic observations establish clear-cut sociolinguistic categories according to ethnolinguistic affiliation and bilingual proficiency, the linguistic and sociological sources strongly suggest a growing degree of contact between speakers of various languages (especially Spanish and Nahuatl) in central Mexico throughout the period covered by the corpus. These differences can be interpreted as the function of both the sociolinguistic environment of contact of the group that produced the minutes as well as the corporate interests of its members, which were rooted in an ideological system where ethnolinguistic affiliation was classifiable into distinct categories. Besides the connection to this particular sociolinguistic environment, this study proposes a protocol to approach and interpret metalinguistic discourse in historically remote sociolinguistic contact settings for which other (more direct) forms of linguistic evidence may be lacking.

References

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