

Language and Empire: The Vision of Nebrija

By Zhenja La Rosa

"Language has always been the perfect instrument of empire."

--Antonio de Nebrija, *Granidtica Castellana*

The vision of Antonio de Nebrija, Bishop of Avila, as stated in the prologue of the *Castilian Grammar* he published in 1492, was one that was to prove prophetic in the following years, as the Spanish Empire extended its reign across the Atlantic. It was prophetic, in that throughout the conquest of the Americas, and the centuries of colonialism, language was used by the Spanish as a tool for conquest: to consolidate political power, to spread the Catholic faith, and to unify the empire. The language policies in the colonial period, however, were not always aimed at spreading the Spanish language. In some situations, Spanish was used as a medium for control, whereas in others, Spaniards employed the Native American languages to exercise their power. Thus the Spanish were masterful opportunists in the administration of the empire, and reacted to the different situations they encountered in the Americas with the most efficient, practical policies, provided that these policies aided in achieving the two main goals of the empire: securing political and economic power, and the conversion of the "barbarians." In both cases, the control and use of language was essential to the conquest.

The relationship between language and empire had been established long before Nebrija described it in his *Castilian Grammar*. Language policies to bolster imperial power had been in place in the Roman Empire, in Spain, and in the Aztec and Incan Empires. Nebrija argues that a single, standard, unchanging language is needed for national cohesion: the dissolution of the Roman Empire along with the dissolution of Latin served as a model and lesson for him. As with the Romans, the need for language policies surfaces when a government attempts to unite, under one central authority, peoples who speak different languages. Often, the presence of more than one language is seen to be a threat to national unity, and there is therefore a tendency toward monolingual policies in empires, resulting in the suppression of minority languages. Peter Trudgill, a noted sociolinguist, remarks that often, "linguistic subjugation (or unification, depending on one's point of view) is . . . an important strategy in implementing political subjugation (or unification)." <1>

Spain had a tradition of linguistic imperialism similar to that described by Trudgill even before the empire reached across the Atlantic. 1492, the year of the publication of Nebrija's *Grammar*, and the year of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas, was also the year in which Spain completed the Reconquista, finally driving out the Moors from Granada, their last stronghold in the Iberian peninsula. Over 700 years of Moorish occupation, however, left a strong influence in Spain, particularly in the Arabic language and the Muslim religion. In addition, It was only in 1479 that the regions of Aragon and Castile were united under one crown, creating a politically united Spain for the first time. These regions, as well as those won back from the Moors, had their own languages and cultures.

The need to unify the nation culturally was felt strongly by Nebrija and the Spanish sovereigns. The Crown viewed the diversity in languages and in religions as a threat to political stability. By bringing all of the different groups together under one language, Castilian, and one religion, Catholicism. Ferdinand and Isabella hoped to create a stable nation. As William Beer notes in a study *Language Policy and National Unity*, "Language policy becomes the social glue through which ... governments seek to bond these human fissures into a stable political and social whole." <2> Language was the key to a united Spain. Thus, the Spanish monarchs instituted a policy of linguistic imperialism in which Castilian became the language of domination. It was in this atmosphere that Nebrija presented his Grammar to the queen as a gift, one he believed would be useful to the empire. "After Your Highness takes under her yoke many barbarian towns and nations with strange tongues, and with the conquering of them, they will need to receive the laws that the conqueror puts on the conquered and with those, our language." <3>

A similar linguistic Imperialism was at work in Aztec and Incan empires before the arrival of the Spaniards. The essence of Nebrija's arguments was alive in the America's indigenous peoples' language policies. Some scholars claim that there were as many as 1,000 languages spoken in the Americas at the time of Columbus' arrival . <4> To deal with this "babel of amerindian languages," as Lidice Gomez Margo terms it, there were processes of

linguistic concentration and unification, in an ethnographic sense, which were made of Nahuatl (or Nahua), maya, quechua and aymara, *linguae francae* shared by many diverse towns and tribes, imposed by hegemonic forms and political and cultural expansion towards the formation of large empires. <5>

In an area where a different language was spoken from town to town, even mutually unintelligible languages spoken in the same town, a common language was indispensable for commerce, politics, and the administration of the empire. As many as 80 different languages were spoken within the realm of the Aztec empire, which stretched across much of what is modern day Mexico and Central America. <6> Nahuatl, the language of the dominant tribe, the Nahua, was made the official language of the empire and was used as a *lingua franca* for the various languages spoken throughout the empire. The Incan empire, too, maintained a policy of linguistic domination in which all subjects of the empire were obligated to know Qucchua, or face punishment. <7>

Thus, Spanish and Native American linguistic policies in 1492 were actually very similar. When the two empires collided, however, the traditional language policies of both empires, which to impose the language of the politically dominant group on all others, initially collapsed. Attempts to spread the Spanish language to the Native Americans in the Conquest period failed for the most part. Thus, Nebrija's prediction that "language has always been the companion of empire, and it followed it with such a way that together they began, they grew, and they flourished, and afterwards, together, they both fell." was only partly true. <8> The Spanish language did not spread and flourish with the Spanish Empire in the initial stages of the conquest, nor did it disappear with the end of the

Empire. The use of language itself however, whether it be Spanish or any one of the Native American languages, played a crucial role in establishing the Spanish Empire, on the military, spiritual. and intellectual level from the first encounters of the Conquest.

Language as an Instrument of Military Conquest

In this first instance of contact, Columbus laid some of the foundations for the Spanish conquest of the Americas, many of which revolve around language. Columbus's acts were based on a formal, ritual tradition of taking possession that had already been in place in the Spanish empire. The Spanish presence in America got its authority from language acts, such as that of taking possession and naming; it derived part of its military advantage through the control of interpreters, and therefore, of information; and it justified its domination by the fact that the Native Americans did not have any religion, and were ripe for conversion.

On October 11, 1492, Columbus's ships landed on the island he named San Salvador. The first thing he did upon landing, as recorded in his Journal, was to call:

the two captains to jump ashore with the rest, who included Rodrigo de Escobedo, secretary of the fleet, and Rodrigo Sanchez de Segovia, asking them to bear solemn witness that in the presence of them all I was talking possession of this island for their Lord and Lady the King and Queen, and I made the necessary declarations which are set down at greater length in the written testimonies. <9>

According to Columbus, the natives of the island soon gathered around. There is a brief period of contact, in which they exchange gifts, and in which Columbus sizes up the people.

They must be good servants, and intelligent, for I can see that they quickly repeat everything said to them. I believe they would readily become Christians; it appeared to me that they have no religion. <10>

Without any linguistic contact, (he doesn't even mention using gestures at this point), Columbus has characterized these people, in light of how they might serve the ultimate aims of Spain. Columbus continues in his journal:

With God's will, I will take six of them with me for Your Majesties when I leave this place, so that they may learn Spanish. <11>

By the time he sets sail, on October 14th, he has named the island San Salvador, and is on his way to take possession of all the surrounding islands.

Authority in the Americas, for the Spaniards, was based on language, speech accompanied by a written record. This tradition derives from a Roman Law, according to Stephen Greenblatt, which acknowledges the act of taking possession by verbalizing the act, as long as the act is not contradicted. <12> Columbus, in his journal, notes that he

wasn't contradicted by anyone, and therefore assumes he has the right to claim the land for the Spanish crown. The rationale behind the process seems absurd, since, of course, there was no possibility for the Indians to contradict him, not understanding his words.

For Columbus, this is not a problem, since he doesn't recognize that the Indians don't understand him. Todorov notes that Columbus refuses to recognize that the Native Americans' languages are different from his own, or that there is any such thing as linguistic diversity at all. His only two options to a foreign language, then, are "to acknowledge it as a language but refuse to believe it is different; or to acknowledge its difference but refuse to admit it is a language." <13> Columbus adopts one or the other position without any particular consistency. But it is evident that upon his initial arrival in the Americas, he believes the former, from his attitude that he understands what the Indians tell him, and vice versa. For example, on October 15, his fifth day in contact with the Indians, he says,

The prisoners I took on San Salvador kept telling me that the people of this island wore great gold bracelets and legbands, but I thought it was an invention to enable them to escape. <14>

Not only does he deny that there is a linguistic barrier, Columbus sees the treachery of the Native Americans as the greatest obstacle to communication.

Columbus's method of taking possession through an oral act, then, makes sense to him. The Roman Law gives him authority. Stephen Greenblatt notes, however, that:

The problem [with this law] is not simply opposing interests-natives' desire to retain possession of their land against the Spanish desire to appropriate-but incommensurable positions. The Arawak are not simply denied the opportunity to dispute the Spanish claim; they are not in the same universe of discourse. <15>

The concept of taking possession through a speech act is nonexistent in their culture. Often the Spanish operate in their own universe where what they say becomes law, even if some people who are affected by that act neither accept nor understand that law. But the formalism of Columbus's actions make them legitimate in his, and the Spaniards' eyes, and therefore, he has authority. The perceived authority through words becomes real authority through other military actions.

Another significant aspect of the process of taking possession is recording the deed. Columbus took the secretary of the fleet, Rodrigo de Escobedo, on shore with him to serve as witness for his claiming the land for Spain. In the conquest, and throughout the colonial period, the Spanish were fanatical about keeping written records and notarizing every step of the conquest. Verbal testimony alone could not be trusted to be accurate. This reflects the significance of the written word for the Spanish, for whom it not only validated speech acts, but also made the act into a historical act.

Part of the ritual process of taking possession was that of naming, or renaming, the territory. Giving an island, or any other piece of land, a name was equated with claiming it for oneself. Columbus is obsessive about naming the places he goes; on December 6 he records:

At dawn we were four leagues from the harbor, which I have called Puerto de Santa Maria. We sighted a beautiful head land ... which I called Cabo de la Estrella; . . . About forty-three miles Cabo del Elefante, and about twenty-two miles East-South-East another which I have called Cabo de Cinquin. <16>

By naming these places, he is insinuating that either they had no name before and he is discovering them, or that he is giving them their correct names. In both cases, he denies their previous identity. Greenblatt states: "Such a christening entails the cancellation of the native name--the erasure of the alien, perhaps demonic, identity--and hence a kind of making new." <17> And Patricia Seed adds that "The practice of naming geographical features in effect converts them from their former status to a new European one: the external body of the land remains the same, but its essence is redefined by a new name." <18> Spanish law recognized the fact that naming should be equated with taking possession in the 1573 *Recopilacion* of the laws of the empire:

After the discoverers arrive to the provinces and lands that they discover, with the officials, they should name all the land, each province for itself, the principal mountains and rivers which are there. and towns and cities that they find in the land. <19>

Naming is not restricted to geography, however, in the Conquest, the Spaniards gave names to individuals and groups just as they did to objects. Native Americans who were taken prisoner by the Spanish to become interpreters were commonly baptized and given Christian names, like Dona Marina, Julian and Melchoir. Naming, then, became a means of conquest of both places and of people.

Thus, in his first encounter with the Indians, Columbus set the precedents for the act of taking possession, all of which revolved around language: oral declarations, written records, and renaming the place, giving it an identity within a European context.

Columbus also initiated the practice of kidnapping natives to serve as interpreters for the Spanish conquistadors. Interpreters were an indispensable instrument in the military conquest of the Americas. In traditional colonial relationships, it is the conquered who learn the language of the conqueror, and the case of the Spanish Empire during the military conquest was no different. As stated in Columbus's record of the first encounter with the natives in the Caribbean, one of the first things Columbus did was "take" six of them in order to teach them Spanish. In essence, he kidnapped them in order to use them to the Spanish advantage in the conquest. Greenblatt comments, that:

The radically unequal distribution of power that lies at the heart of almost all language learning in the New World is most perfectly realized in the explorers' preferred method

for dealing with the language problem... From the very first day in 1492, the principal means chosen by the Europeans to establish linguistic contact was kidnapping. <20>

Typically, it was captured Indians who served as translators for the Spanish. There were few cases of Spaniards who learned Indian languages in the initial wave of conquest.

The demand for translators was immense, and the custom of kidnapping an Indian or two to serve as translators every time the Spanish entered a new territory was so common that it was a routine part of almost every conquest expedition. Francisco de Solano notes that:

When the Indians of the region were ignorant of the language of other zones to be conquered, the conquistador would try to capture in advance some Indians from those areas to make them his allies and to teach them Spanish and to entrust to them the future task of guides and translators for the army in dangerous territories. <21>

The policy was codified into law in 1573 by the *New Ordinances of Discovery and Population*, which gave the conquistadors the right to take three or four Indians from each zone as interpreters. <22> The tradition of bringing translators along on every conquest expedition was such a common practice that the administrative, judicial and religious branches of the empire were severely lacking in interpreters.

The Spanish believed that having interpreters at their disposal would be essential to the military conquest; and they were not mistaken. Throughout the conquest, native interpreters who accompanied the Spanish in their expeditions served as guides, as a medium for communication, and perhaps most importantly, as irreplaceable sources of information. Interpreters could provide indispensable military information, which aided in planning attacks. Learning the size, structure and military tactics of the enemy army could be the difference between victory and defeat.

The Spanish used interpreters to gather cultural information of all types about those they were going to subjugate which was useful in the conquest, as it helped them learn how best to approach these people. Sometimes this information could help avoid armed conflict altogether.

In the 1573 *Ordinances of Discovery Law 15* expresses how these interpreters could be used to the advantage of the conquistadors:

Try to bring some Indians for interpreters to the places you go, where you think it will be the most fitting... And by way of said interpreters. . . speak with those from the land, and have chats and conversations with them, trying to understand their customs, the quality and way of life of the people of that land, and disperse yourselves, informing yourselves about the religion they have ... if they have some kind of doctrine or form of writing; how they rule and govern themselves, if they have kings and if they are elected as in a republic or by lineage; what taxes and tribute they give and pay and in what way to which persons... And in this way you will know if there is any type of stones, precious things like those which are esteemed in our kingdom. <23>

In the conquest of the Aztec Empire, Cortez had two indispensable interpreters at his side: La Malinche (Dona Marina) and Geronimo de Aguilar. Dona Marina spoke both Maya and Nahuatl, the official language of the Aztec empire, Aguilar, a native of Spain who had been shipwrecked in the Yucatan, spoke both Spanish and Maya. Through the cooperative translations of these two, Cortes learned about the makeup of the Aztec empire, and was able to use this information to his advantage.

As Todorov observes, "It is as a consequence of this perfected system of information that Cortes quickly gains a detailed knowledge of the existence of internal dissensions among the Indians." <24> What Cortes discovered was that the Tlaxcalans, a tribe which had been subsumed under the Aztec Empire, were still hostile enemies of the Aztecs. As a result, Cortes was able to convince them to wage war against the Aztecs as the allies of the Spanish.

There were examples too, when the system of capturing Indians to be interpreters backfired. As long as the Spanish were in control of language, and the information that goes along with that language, the system worked well. But when that information leaked, they suffered militarily. Melchoir, an interpreter from the Yucatan, escaped and found refuge with a nearby tribe, the Tabascans. He informed them about the Spanish, and incited them to attack Cortes' army. <25>

Controlling information about the enemy was crucial as evidenced in both examples. Generally, it was only the Spanish who had the interpreters and therefore an understanding of their opponent, which gave them a distinct military advantage. Thus, translators played an important role in the conquest, one which some scholars argue was the key factor in the Spanish victory. Todorov claims that "the effective conquest of information leads to the ultimate collapse of the Aztec empire." <26> And Stephen Greenblatt suggests that "without good communication, the Spanish could never have been victorious." <27>

Though interpreters were one key to the Spanish military success against the Aztec Empire, sometimes the Spanish found it more to their advantage not to use interpreters, as in the case of the *Requirimiento*. Officially, this was a document to be read and interpreted to the Indians before any attack or other act of violence against them. In practice, however, this was rarely the course of events.

The text of the "Requirement," which was drawn up in 1513 at the request of King Ferdinand, rationalized the Spanish right to conquer the native people, and therefore their territory, in the Americas. Ultimately, this right lay in a papal bull issued by Pope Alexander II which made the Spanish crown the sole church authority in the "New World." In an effort to Christianize and save the "barbarians," the conquistadors acted in the name of the Crown, the Crown in the name of the pope, and the pope in the name of God. What the Requirement mandated was that the Indians submit to this authority and allow the Spanish to preach the Christian faith to them. If they did not accept these terms, the conquistadors felt justified in violently forcing the Indians to submit. The text reads:

We shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do all the harm and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him. <28>

The Requirement was absurd in its conception. In order to have the Indians understand the text, it was necessary to first have an interpreter. But the traditional Spanish practice of capturing natives so they could become interpreters was in itself a violent act. Therefore, the terms of the Requirement were often ignored by the Spanish conquistadors. Hanke describes some of the abuses of the process as follows:

The Requirement was read to trees and empty huts when no Indians were to be found. Captains muttered its theological phrases into their beards on the edge of sleeping Indian settlements, or even a league away before starting the formal attack. <29>

Interpretation was not necessary, nor was it desired. The formal act of reading the text was what gave it legitimacy for the Spanish. Once again, a verbal act becomes an act of military conquest. At all levels, language was a means to the Spanish military conquest of the Americas. Through language, the Spanish got their authority, as seen in the ritual speech of taking possession, the written account of that act, and the custom of naming as an act of appropriation. Through language, the Spanish also got some of their military advantage: control of interpreters meant the control of information, and the control of information was imperative in the military conquest. And lastly, the formal act of reading the text of the Requirement served as a justification for the military conquest, a justification which was based on religion.

Language as an Instrument of Spiritual Conquest

From the start, the claim to a superior religion, Christianity, justified the Spanish claim to colonize the Americas. Thus, spreading Christianity became one of the main objectives of the Spanish Empire, for without it, the monarchs could not justify their claim to the wealth and labor which would be extracted from the new colonies. Pope Alexander II had given the Spanish monarchs the sole right and responsibility to convert the "barbarians," or non-Christians, they encountered in their explorations. The right to convert the natives meant the right to subjugate them and confiscate their territory if they refused to accept Spanish rule and Christianity. The responsibility which went along with that right meant that the Spanish had to devote both labor and capital to the conversion of the natives. Religious conversion was inextricably tied to language, and the changing language policies over the first century of the conquest reflect the Spanish government's attempts to use language to its fullest in the spiritual conquest of the Americas.

In order to convert the Indians, a common language was necessary for communication. Columbus realized this on his first journey. On November 27th, he reports in his journal:

I shall have the language taught to one of my people [a Spaniard], for I can see that so far the same language is spoken everywhere. Then it will be possible to find out which things are useful and to convert these people to Christianity. <30>

Though Columbus's initial response was to have a Spaniard learn the native language in order to facilitate conversion, official Crown policy from the beginning was to teach the Indians Castilian. In theory, Castilian and Catholicism were to spread together, Castilian serving as the medium for transmitting the religion and culture of Spain. This had been the basis for a system for conversion in the Iberian peninsula as the Spanish sovereigns sought to unify the Empire at home. Heath notes that "Resorting to the Inquisition to help purge the kingdom of Jewish and Arab influence, Isabella began a program of religious nationalization which later monarchs carried on toward identification of Catholicism with Castilianization." <31> The tradition was extended to the Americas.

It was believed that language and culture were inseparable, and that the Castilian language would convey Spanish culture, including its religion. In a royal proclamation to the order of Santo Domingo, King Charles V decreed:

I beg you and charge that you procure like all the religious in your Order in the province where you live that you strive in all possible ways to teach the Indians of that land our Castilian language, and in this place all carefulness and diligence, as it is something very principal and of much importance, because . . . it seems it is the quickest way that these people can arrive at an understanding of our true God and be instructed in the things of our holy Catholic faith. <32>

The belief that Castilian was the only possible means of transmitting Catholicism was strong. As a result, education in Castilian and Catholic indoctrination were hardly distinguishable in the early colonial period.

To teach, however, it was necessary to have the Indians gathered together in one place. As early as 1503, the Crown mandated that the Indians be relocated in towns, and that in each town, a church and school be built side by side, for the salvation of the souls of the Indians, and to teach them Spanish. The schools were to teach the Indians "to read and to write and bless and make the sign of the cross and the confession and the Paternoster and the Ave Maria and the Credo and the Salva Regina." <33> Another way of assembling the Indians was through the *encomienda* system. An *encomienda* was a grant of Indians given to a man to use for tribute labor, usually as a reward for his military service to the Spanish Crown. Officially, the responsibility for Christianizing and Castilianizing the Indians was relegated to the *encomendero*. He, in turn, would hire a priest, or *doctrinero*, who was charged with teaching the Indians. The *doctrinero* could not accomplish the enormous feat of teaching all the Indians on the *encomienda*, so instead, he would teach an elite few.

In 1513, the Laws of Burgos outlined how the religious education of the Indians was to be accomplished on both the *encomiendas* and other resettlements: the sons of the *caciques*, or chiefs, who were under thirteen years of age were to be sent to the priests to

be taught to read and write, and to be indoctrinated in Catholicism. These young men, after four years of education, were to return to their homes to teach what they had learned to the people there. It was assumed that the Indians would "take it much better from them" than from any Spaniard. <34> This was not the case. Lidice Gomez Mango affirms that, sixty-five years later, "the indigenous people remained attached to their own languages. Only a minority learned Spanish." <35>

The reason for the failure of the original Crown policy toward language and religion was that the mandate was simply impractical. It was impossible to enforce Spanish as an official language when only a minority of the population spoke it. Teaching Spanish to such an overwhelming majority of the population required manpower which was either too costly or not available. The *encomenderos*, faced with this dilemma, often ignored the Crown's mandate to educate and indoctrinate the Indians in their jurisdiction.

There were other objections to teaching the Indians and Christianizing them in Spanish, apart from its impracticality. Some Spaniards realized that the Indians who did learn Spanish were able to use the language to their advantage. Many bilingual Indians served as translators, and in the courts they sometimes falsified testimonies for personal gain. <36> As a result, many *encomenderos* felt that it was dangerous to teach Spanish to the Indians. There were also objections from the missionaries themselves, whose job it was to convert and Castilianize the Indians. The clergy feared that losing their control over language would threaten their traditional role as mediator between the government and the Indians. <37> As long as the Indians didn't know Spanish, they needed the priests to translate.

As it became clear that teaching Castilian to the Indians was not practical or desirable, missionaries began evangelizing in the Indians' native languages. The main goal of education had always been the spiritual conversion of the Indians, not spreading Castilian. It had been assumed that the two would spread together, Castilian being the vehicle for Catholicism. But when this policy failed, the traditional view of Castilian as the instrument for spiritual conversion was abandoned, and there was a split between Castilian and religion.

The missionaries were determined to keep a tight reign on language and if it couldn't be the Spanish language, it had to be the Indians' own languages. To be certain that the Indians understood the sermons and details of the Catholic faith, that message had to be transmitted in their own language. Solano notes that:

Faced with the total incomprehension of the contents [of the prayers in Latin or Castilian] the missionaries concluded that in order for the preaching to be effective, it would have to be the friar who learned the indigenous language. <38>

Another reason the missionaries preferred to learn the indigenous languages was that they wanted to keep tabs on the religious education of the natives. If they could not understand their language, there was no way of knowing whether the Indians had understood the teachings correctly, or if they were spreading heresies in indigenous languages. Effective

communication was necessary for conversion, and it was believed that it was necessary to learn the language and culture of the people in order to convert them. <39> Thus, it was the priests who were the first Europeans to learn the indigenous languages.

The policy of learning the native languages with the purpose of evangelization was well established in the Spanish Empire among the clergy even at the time that the crown resisted an official change in language policy. As late as 1550, Charles V still insisted that all Indians be instructed in Castilian. Fifteen years later, in 1565, the Crown's official language policy had undergone a radical change, mandating that the missionaries learn Indian languages. In fact, it had merely codified what the missionaries had been doing in practice for many years. Instead of ordering that all Indians be instructed in Castilian, the king now ordered that all missionaries know the language of the natives who lived in the territory to which they were sent. In another royal decree, the king urged bishops in the Viceroyalty of New Spain (present day Mexico and Central America) to give preference to clergy who knew the languages of the province in which they served. <40>

At first, the prospect of requiring the priests to learn the native language of the population they ministered to seemed almost as daunting as that of teaching Spanish to all of the Indians. The linguistic diversity of the Americas was astounding; for a priest to learn all of the different languages of the area in which he preached would have been impossible. In a single town where Indians had been relocated there could be many mutually unintelligible languages spoken. This was a problem that the Aztecs had encountered in administering their empire, a problem which had been confronted by the using of Nahuatl as a lingua franca among the groups.

The first response of the Spanish was, naturally, to appropriate the already existing system of Nahuatl domination and use it to their own advantage. As early as 1550, the priest Rodrigo de la Cruz, in a letter to the king, suggested that Nahuatl be made the official language of the Indians in New Spain.

To me it seems that Your Majesty should mandate that everyone learn the Mexican language, because there are not many towns in which there are not many Indians who do not already know it and they will learn it without much difficulty, since they already use it and very many confess in it. <41>

It would be much easier to control one language than a multitude of languages. Therefore, in 1570 Nahuatl was made the official language of the Indians of Mexico. Heath notes that this policy was integral to spreading Catholicism in New Spain: "the extension of the Mexican language was a necessary accessory for the establishment of the Christian faith among the Indians." <42> As a result, Nahuatl spread beyond the original boundaries of the Aztec empire.

Similar language policies were instituted in other regions of the Empire. In the Viceroyalty of Peru, for example, Quechua was promoted as a lingua franca among the Indians in the Andes, just as it had been during the Incan Empire. Here as in New Spain, Quechua extended beyond the limits of the old Incan Empire as the priests encouraged its

use. At first the minority language groups viewed the Spanish conquest as a liberation for their languages from Quechua domination. These languages, in fact, flourished in the earliest years of the conquest, but Greg Urban notes that "In order to maintain the symbolism of linguistic control. . . the Spanish had to first ensure that Quechua remained in place as 'lengua general del Peru.'" <43> Thus, there was a campaign to reinforce the use of Quechua in order to place Spanish as the dominant language over it.

In both viceroyalties, controlling language was essential to exercising control over the Empire. The system of supporting one native language over others worked well in the central areas, where the Spanish were merely appropriating a process already begun by the Indian Empires. But on the frontiers, where the empires had never reached, and where Nahuatl was as little known as Spanish, the policy had little effect. Missionaries in these regions were forced to learn the language of the indigenous people in that region. But the overall result was that there was never any true process of Castilianization in the early conquest period, and relatively few Indians learned Spanish.

Language may have been the perfect instrument of empire, but in the case of the Spanish empire, it wasn't the Spanish language that was used as an instrument of communication or control in the early years of the empire. It proved to be more important and efficient to control the native languages of the Indians than to force Spanish on them. Still there were objections to using the Indian languages as a means of conversion.

One problem with this policy was that there was a short supply of missionaries who spoke the native languages, and there were many Indians who did not speak the dominant Indian language, whether it be Nahuatl or Quechua. The King explains:

I have been told about the great difficulty that there is in teaching and instructing the Indians about our Holy Catholic Faith in their languages because they are not common, smooth or intelligible, even to the very Indians who in some provinces do not understand each other. <44>

The Council of the Indies claimed that because of these gaps in communication, "the Indians suffer in their Christianity." <45> The one Indian language, Nahuatl, which was a lingua franca for all Indians and missionaries was not widespread enough to reach all. When an Indian language was used in an area as a lingua franca, other problems arose. There were some, the King included, who believed that the Indians, in holding on to their language, would also retain their old religious practices. The belief in the direct relationship between language and culture still held strong. In 1590, the King wrote that the Indians should be instructed in Castilian "to remove the occasions of idolatry and other vices and things that distract them by way of their language." <46>

The problem of translation was another which caused much dispute as to whether indoctrination should be done in Indian languages. Many words, especially in the religious vocabulary, represented concepts which simply did not exist in the native language. The missionaries' concern for the correct transmission of the Catholic faith, "correct" meaning their own interpretation, was hard to reconcile with the fact that some

of the basic words of the faith were untranslatable into the Indian tongue. How could the word "God" be translated when what the Indians meant by their word for God and the Catholic definition of God were two totally different concepts? Sahagun, who attempted a faithful chronicle the Indians' history by recording oral testimonies in Nahuatl, substituted the word "devil" for the Nahuatl "god" in his translation of the work. <47> Often, these troublesome concepts would be described in Nahuatl. For example, Lockhart cites the example of the word "to baptize," which had no Nahuatl equivalent. The Nahuatl word used in its place, *quaatequia* literally meant "to throw water on someone's head." <48> Purists believed that altering words such as this was contaminating the Catholic faith, and they argued that the Indian languages were not appropriate for religious instruction.

Apart from difficulties with translation, it was commonly accepted that the Indian languages were innately inferior to Spanish, and were therefore unworthy of being used to teach Christianity. The King, in 1586, explained to the Viceroy of Peru that "the languages are poor in vocabulary, names and verbs to signify many important things." <49> Thus, it was reasoned, Castilian was the only language appropriate for spreading Catholicism. As indigenous languages were presumed to be inferior to Castilian, the Crown changed its policy from one of affirming Nahuatl to one of suppressing it in public. At the end of the century, in 1596, the orders from Madrid were "that the Indians must speak the Castilian language and in it they must be taught the doctrine." <50> The Indian languages would be tolerated, but only Castilian was to be taught in the schools and churches.

The religious conquest and language policies went hand in hand throughout the colonial period. Language policies reflected attempts of the Crown to make the conversion effective. Thus, the official policies display a willingness to adopt indigenous languages, as long as using that language did not adversely affect the more important goal of spiritual conversion. But when doubts as to whether the indigenous languages were adequate for transmitting the Catholic faith arose, official language policy followed suit and reverted to the original policy of enforcing Castilian as the official language of Imperial administration as well as of Catholicism.

Language as an Instrument of the Conquest of History

One of the principal reasons for believing that the Indian languages were inferior was the Spanish misconception that the Indians lacked a corresponding phonetic writing system for their spoken language, like the Roman alphabet which was used by the Spanish. The belief in their superiority in writing was so powerful that it was one of the main arguments for justifying the conquest. It also was the foundation for a conquest at an intellectual level. Because the Spanish were in control of writing, and the means of publication, they were also in control of the history of the conquest and of the Americas which was presented to the rest of the world. Spanish economic and political dominance meant the suppression of indigenous accounts of their own history and their replacement by histories written along Spanish models from a Spanish viewpoint.

It was not the case, however, that the Indians lacked a writing system adequate for recording their history; this was, rather, a deficiency perceived by the Spanish due to their attitude with regard to writing. At the time of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, both the Maya and the Aztecs used completely functional writing systems to record their history, as well as their astrological, medicinal and scientific knowledge, and to serve administrative purposes. These two systems reflected the indigenous cultures' emphasis on oral tradition.

Aztec writing was pictographic, and thus there was a hazy boundary between painting and writing. Also, since the pictograms often represented concepts rather than specific words, the distinction between reading and narrating was not clearly defined. In fact, the Nahuatl verb for "to read" is better translated as "to narrate." [51](#) There is evidence that Mayan writing, though primarily pictographic, does have some phonetic elements. Linda King suggests that Mayan writing was a mixed system, including both phonetic and logographic characters, and that the long-held belief that the writing was strictly logographic has delayed accurate deciphering of existing Mayan texts. [52](#)

Because these systems were largely pictographic instead of phonetic, they were not initially even recognized as writing. Bartolome de las Casas, a Franciscan friar known as the defender of the Indians, was one of the main proponents of this argument. He asserted that the Indians were barbarians, not because they were not Christians, for they had not been exposed to Christianity and it was therefore not their fault, but because they lacked writing. In his testimony *In Defense of the Indians*, (an ironic title for such a work), las Casas states that one class of barbarians

includes those who do not have a written language that corresponds to the spoken one, as the Latin alphabet does with ours, and therefore they do not know how to express in it what they mean. For this reason they are considered to be uncultured and ignorant of letters and learning. [53](#)

Part of las Casas' argument that the Indians were incompetent to "express what they mean" was based on the oral nature of Indian writing. Aztec writing was dependent on an oral system which interpreted the characters; a single text, then, could be interpreted in many different ways, depending on the "reader." Pictograms could not be equated with exact words, but were subject to interpretation. Mignolo summarizes the Spanish view of the necessity of alphabetic writing for recording history in "Misunderstanding and Colonization: The Reconfiguration of Memory and Space:"

It was the belief in the accurate preservation of memory and the glorification of the past by means of alphabetic writing that resulted in a powerful complicity between the power of the letter and the authority of history. [54](#)

For the Spanish, history could only be interpreted in one way, and could only be recorded by alphabetic writing to have any validity, leading them to discredit Aztec records as accurate history, or as history at all.

Not only did they discredit the native records, the Spanish systematically destroyed the indigenous texts which were found on the pretense that the books had been inspired by the devil. <55> Native texts were burned by the Spanish in an attempt to erase the collective memory of the people. Linda King notes that

The Aztecs had a strong sense of history and its relation to the written word. Like the Spaniards, they realized that the destruction of the accumulated knowledge and history of a people as set down in the written word offered the possibility of rewriting history and reinventing knowledge. <56>

Thus, as the Spanish burned indigenous texts, they left a void in written records of the native accounts of their own history and culture which could be filled by accounts based on a Spanish viewpoint.

Because the Spanish denied the accuracy and historical nature of native writings, they took upon themselves the task of writing the Indians' history for them. Mignolo explains that "this conclusion was a sufficient condition for the missionaries and men of letters to become the self-appointed chroniclers the Amerindians apparently did not have." <57> As a result, most accounts of native history have been mediated in some way through Spanish or European eyes.

It was possible for the Spanish to maintain control of writing and, as a consequence, the writing of history, for two basic reasons: they possessed an alphabetic writing which was accepted as the only accurate medium for recording history, and they possessed the political and economic power to control the means of production of texts. This is not to say that native accounts of their own history disappeared when their books were burned; on the contrary, Indians continued to write their history, sometimes even using their own writing systems as before. These texts, however, were ignored by the people in power and were therefore riot theories which were published, reproduced, and circulated. Only those texts which conformed to the Spanish alphabet and writing style were published.

Spanish dominance in writing history has led to many misconceptions about the conquest and the indigenous people of the Americas which still persist to this day. The discourse used by the Spanish to describe their colonialism is telling of the power of writing in shaping peoples' concepts of the Americas. Spanish discourse on the conquest was so effective in molding how the conquest was perceived leads Asselin Charles to conclude that "Colonialist discourse, the verbal expression of the West's will and right to power, has turned out to be one of the most effective weapons of conquest and dominance." <58> Remnants of colonialist discourse are evident in the common language used to describe the events of 1492, as in a statement like: Columbus discovered the Americas, or the New World, which was inhabited by the Indians.

The concept of "America" is a European invention, as Edmundo O'Gorman argues. Before any contact with the Europeans, the indigenous people of the Americas had no concept of "America" or of being "American." They did not view the land as one unified

entity as opposed to another, e.g. Europe, Africa, or Asia. Mignolo summarizes O'Gorman's standpoint as follows:

America was not an existing entity, in the middle of an unknown ocean, waiting to be discovered, but ... it was a European invention. Certainly, the mass of land existed, Amerindians and their own conceptual territorial and cosmological representations existed, but they were not Americans because America, as a way of conceiving the four parts of the world, did not exist. <59>

The notion of a "New World" was just as erroneous as that of "America." The words "New World" imply that it did not exist before. Mignolo points out that the "European observer showed once again his unconscious arrogance. . in that what for him was not known had to be, of necessity, new." <60>

Just as there was no concept of America, nor was there one of "Indian" before the Spanish designated all the people they encountered in the Americas as such. The indigenous people viewed themselves in terms of distinct tribes with distinct cultures, and identified no unified or homogeneous race that could be equated with "Indian." The use of the term *Indio* to refer to all indigenous peoples of the Americas ignored the natives' own conception of their identity, and replaced it with a European invention. James Lockhart affirms that "Spanish documents, and even Spanish translations of Nahuatl documents, make repeated use of the term Indian (indio), but rarely do we find it in Nahuatl documents, not even in the very ones whose translations use the word." <61> Thus, Spanish control of writing, especially in the area of writing history, had consequences which were critical to the way the world perceived, and continues to perceive, the conquest and the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Apart from the language of colonialism, which distorted the facts of native history because of its Eurocentric viewpoint, creating interpretative errors, factual errors were made about events and native knowledge. It is not that the Spanish were merely poor chroniclers, or that they maliciously falsified Indian accounts of their own history. Rather, the Spanish were often meticulous chroniclers, intent on preserving indigenous accounts of their history as accurately as possible. This, however, was impossible, as the Spanish operated in a different framework than the Indians which colored everything they wrote, and everything they did not write. Asselin Charles explains that, from the first records of the Spanish in the Americas, the diaries of Columbus, this framework affected the discourse on the Indians and the empire:

[Columbus] carried with him certain schemes of representation of the world, a mindset, a certain way of understanding both physical and human realities. . The world found by Columbus would be forced into the emerging paradigm in a discourse that was partly religious and partly economic, incorporating into its lexicon the myths, obsessions, dreams, and nightmares of Europe. <62>

History writing was done within this framework, and thus the preservation of the events of the conquest, and of the indigenous cultures of the Americas was always seen from a distinctively European viewpoint.

Being in control of writing means having the power to determine what is said and what is omitted. Inaccuracy in recording indigenous records can in part be blamed on the selectiveness of Spanish chroniclers, who were unable to determine what was important or relevant information. Even the most rigorous attempts at documentation and transcription of Indian knowledge were subject to this fallacy.

The work of Francisco Hernandez, a physician who was assigned the task of gathering information about medicinal plants found in New Spain and their use, illustrates how omission adversely affected the chronicling of native history. In recording the names and uses of the plants, he failed to mention religious uses of the plants, something that was inseparable from indigenous medicine. Rochelle La Rosa has found that "he lists only the expectorant and soporific effects of tobacco (*picietl*) and omits its use as a stimulant for fatigue or as a hallucinogen in religious ceremony." <63>

Sahagun is another example of a historian and chronicler who carefully recorded indigenous accounts of their history in his monumental work *The Florentine Codex*. He interviewed Indians who were eyewitnesses to the conquest and used native scribes to record and illustrate what was said in Nahuatl. It would seem that his method would be a close reflection of the indigenous view of their own history and culture. This is not the case. The organization of the work is entirely European, as all is mediated through Sahagun's eyes. The questionnaires which he used to organize the accounts are one way of controlling the information. Todorov notes that "Not only do the questionnaires impose a European origin on American knowledge, and sometimes keep the relevant information from passing through, they also determine the themes to be treated, by excluding certain others." <64> Apart from Sahagun's presence in the Nahuatl material, the accompanying Spanish translation to the Nahuatl text includes notes, prologues and digressions, which according to Todorov, frame the entire work. <65> Thus, though the information comes from legitimate native sources, the final work is notably European in its outlook.

One of the native responses to this problem was to adopt the Spanish phonetic writing and use it to their advantage. This was possible because the missionaries had been teaching Indians to write as part of their evangelization. The skill of alphabetic writing became a self-perpetuating tradition within the Indian communities. It was realized that adopting the Spanish writing system was necessary to resist the intellectual conquest the Spanish were carrying out. Continuing the traditions of earlier Nahua and Maya writings was an important form of resistance to the colonization of indigenous history. The *Chilim Balam* and *Popol Vuh* are both examples of this type of writing of resistance. They are believed to be copies of earlier, pre-Hispanic works, as well as records of the oral traditions, which contain knowledge of religion, science, and history of the Mayan people. <66> These works, however, could not be written until after the Indians had learned to use the Spanish writing system, a skill which was not transmitted among

Indian communities until well after the initial phase of the conquest. Thus, there are no firsthand, native accounts of the conquest. <67>

Garcilaso de la Vega, a mestizo and direct descendent of the Incan emperors, is perhaps the most famous Indian whose work was published and was widely accepted. He recognized the problems inherent in the practice of Spaniards mediating the writing of the Indians' history. In *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, published in 1609, he criticizes the writing that had been done previously. His purpose in writing the history of his people is:

to serve as a commentary to declare and expand upon many things which they [the Spanish] left imperfect, having lacked the complete history. Many other things will be added. . . due to the false account that they had, because the Spaniard did not know to ask about the distinction of times and ages, and the division of provinces and nations, or for not having understood the Indian who gave the information... <68>

The Spanish were incompetent for writing Indian history because they were not familiar with the culture enough to know what to ask about, what was important, or how to organize the information. Garcilaso claims his authority as historian of the Incas because he had access to the oral tradition of his mother and her relatives which transmits all the history of the people. Despite his criticisms, however, Garcilaso still narrates the history of his people through European eyes. In the prologue, he offers the work "with no other pretension or interest than that of serving the Christian republic" and he

gives thanks to Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary his mother, by whose merits and intercession his Eternal Majesty deigned to take so many great nations out of the abyss of idolatry and reduce them to the guild of the Roman Catholic Church. <69>

Garcilaso's approach to Incan history is from a Catholic perspective, even though he is half Indian. He has not only adopted the alphabet of the Spanish, but he has adopted some of their presuppositions, which influence his account.

As the Spanish were in control of the means of printing, they could monitor which histories would be presented to the rest of the world, and which would be repressed. Garcilaso was popular because he adapted to Spanish norms. There were some Indian historians, such as Titu Cusi Yupanqui and Guaman Poma de Ayala, who were able to maintain Indian values, organization, and forms, but their works were not published until the twentieth century. <70>

One of the most important effects of the Spanish control of writing and publication was the resultant silence of the Indians. The absence of the Indian voice is evident in the texts written during the conquest, as they are all written from a European viewpoint. Silence is also notable in the absence of native writings, the void left by those which were burned, or as Mignolo describes, by "those texts which we cannot talk about either because they had not been written or because they are still buried in the archives and we do not yet know about them." <71>

Silence, however, does not imply a loss of memory. In cultures which are primarily oral, the written word, though important, is not the main medium for transmitting knowledge. Through the oral tradition, much of the history and knowledge of sciences, religion, and culture has been preserved for a distinctively native viewpoint. For example, in the case of recording the medicinal uses of plants, though written records contain many errors due to problems with translation or incomplete data, the knowledge has not been lost. La Rosa notes that "since medical knowledge was an oral tradition within families and within villages, the actual loss of medical and medicinal manuscripts may have been in fact, quite minimal." [72](#) In recent years, the testimony of Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), is evidence of the persistence of an oral culture which resists Spanish hegemony. In her work, Menchu gives one explanation for the silence of the Indians: they wanted to preserve their culture, and speaking to outsiders about it would make it subject to misinterpretation. Though her testimony is a voice for her people, she chooses to remain silent on certain subjects.

Spanish hegemony in writing the official history of the conquest and the people in the Americas, along with the colonialist language which was a part of that history, consistently ignored indigenous conceptions of themselves and their history, in favor of ones which were fundamentally European in outlook. This does not mean that the Spanish history replaced the Indians' history; rather, the Spanish controlled the vision of the conquest and of the Indians which was presented to the rest of the world. The Indians, through their oral tradition, were able to maintain much of their collective knowledge, even to this day.

The connection between language and empire was established well before the Spanish empire reached across the Atlantic. Nebrija foresaw that language would be important in establishing and maintaining the empire abroad, and thus presented a grammar of Castilian to the Queen, with the belief that a unified language would support a unified empire. It is true that, from the initial contact between the Spanish and the indigenous people of the Americas, language was a tool for empire. Language became the means of establishing authority in the military conquest of the Americas, of justifying the conquest, and of implementing a spiritual conquest. Control of language was essential to consolidating the empire; whether it was controlling Spanish or indigenous languages, the Spanish policies reflect an awareness of the power of Language. In an empire which encompasses many different languages and cultures which are treated unequally, language can easily become a rallying point for rebellion. They were careful throughout the conquest period not to lose control of language, fearing it would mean losing control of the empire.

One of the most effective ways the Spanish used language to consolidate their empire was through controlling history, what was written, what was omitted, and what was published and circulated. The Spanish were successful to a certain extent in imparting their vision, as opposed to the Indians' vision, of the history of the conquest and of the conquered people. The Spanish had control of writing and the means of production of texts, and could effectively control written history. Mignolo speaks of this as the "colonization of memory," implying that the Spanish accounts took the place of those the

Indians had in their own minds. <73> But Spanish language policies, however, did not erase the indigenous memories which were maintained through a strong oral tradition which is still alive.

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[Return to the 1995-6 Table of Contents](#)