

CLASH OF NAHUATL ORTHOGRAPHIES

IMPLICATIONS ON LANGUAGE
TEACHING AND REVITALIZATION

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Why standardized orthography is important in language revitalization?

- Practical importance

prerequisite for production of materials in the language:
dictionaries, grammars, texts for language instruction,
development of curriculum in the language

- Ideological importance

enhancement of language's prestige both
in the eyes of native speakers and outsiders
> enhancement of its status

Standardization of orthography for multi-dialectal endangered languages

4 possible strategies (Jones & Mooney 2017):

- unilectal (one variety above others)
- dialectal (a standard is developed for each variety)
- multilectal (contains features from several varieties)
- “common core” (emphasizes structural features common to all the varieties)

Modern Nahuatl:

dialectal strategy is
a reasonable choice, but...



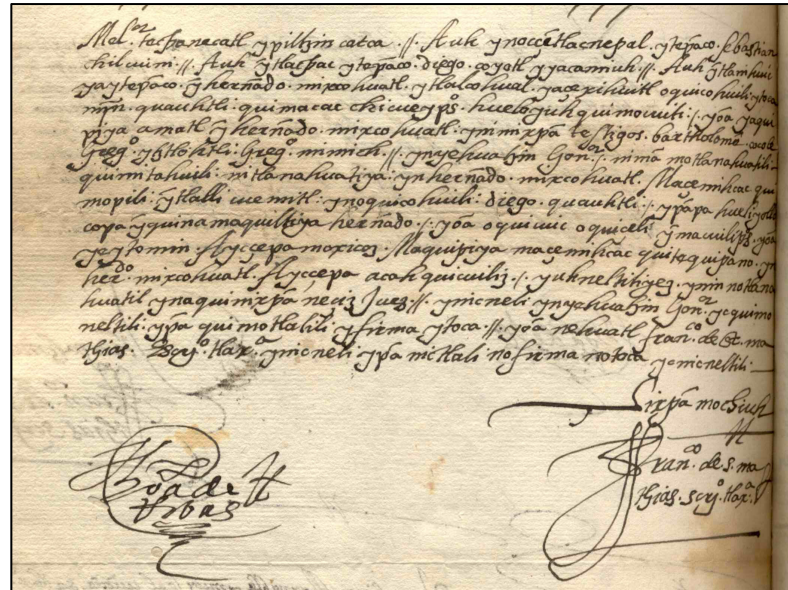
Standardization of orthography for multi-dialectal endangered languages

EXTRA-LINGUISTIC FACTORS

- Standardization process can always lead to conflicts between groups of speakers, especially when each group already practices independently developed writing system
- In addition, local authorities, foreign researchers and activists tend to interfere and establish their control on the order of things
- Imposing orthography, which was developed outside the speaking community, without preliminary consultations with native speakers is not at all recommended
- Otherwise the target population can feel ignored and grow animosity towards language planning initiatives

History of the question: Classical Nahuatl writing (from XVI c.)

tl	
tz	
[s]	- ç/z, c
[ʃ]	- x
[h]	- h
[k]	- c, qu
[w]	- hu, uh
[kw]	- cu



Neuatl Diego Quauhtli y nicnequi ce tilmatlizoli inic nechquimilozque auh y notlalnacayo nicnomaquilia yn tlalli ye ica ca itech oquizqui auh y nanima ma quimocelilliz in nanima auh niqitoua...

„I, Diego Quauhtli, make my testament and wish for an old shroud, with which they will wrap me. And I give my earthly body to the earth because this is where it came from. And with respect to my soul, may it receive my soul.”

1980s: Orthography developed by “Secretaría de Educación Pública” (SEP)

tl		
tz		
[s]	-	s
[ʃ]	-	x
[h]	-	j
[k]	-	k
[w]	-	u
[kw]	-	ku



- Developed for the module of “Indigenous Education”
- Process of development was not transparent
- The same orthography was implemented in different regions of Mexico

2018: Orthography developed by “Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas” (INALI)

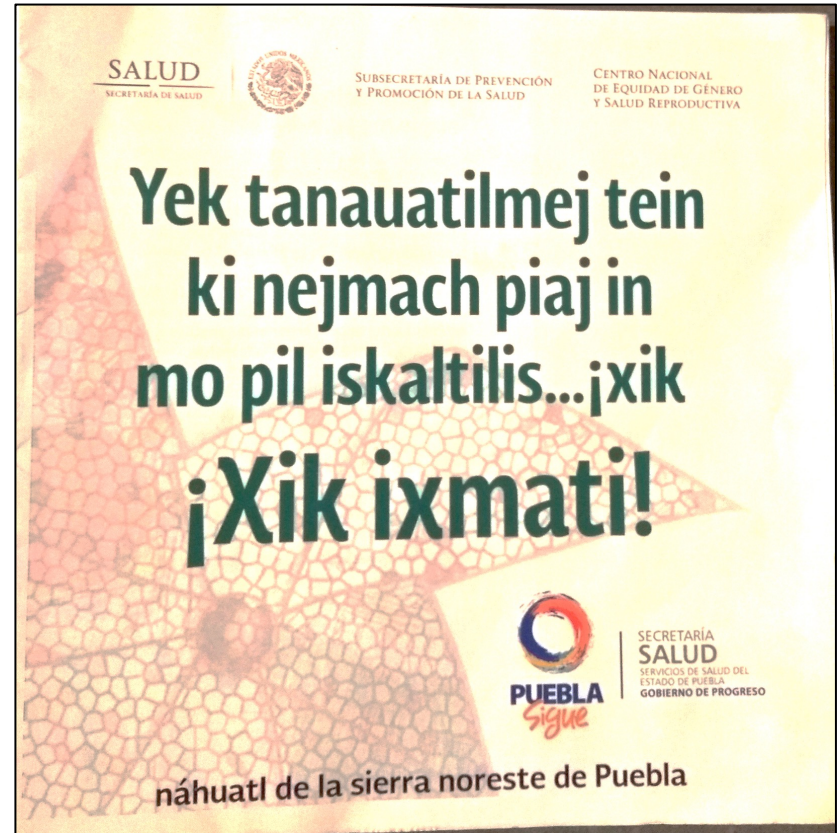
tz	-	ts
[s]	-	s
[j]	-	x
[h]	-	h
[k]	-	k
[w]	-	w
[kw]	-	kw



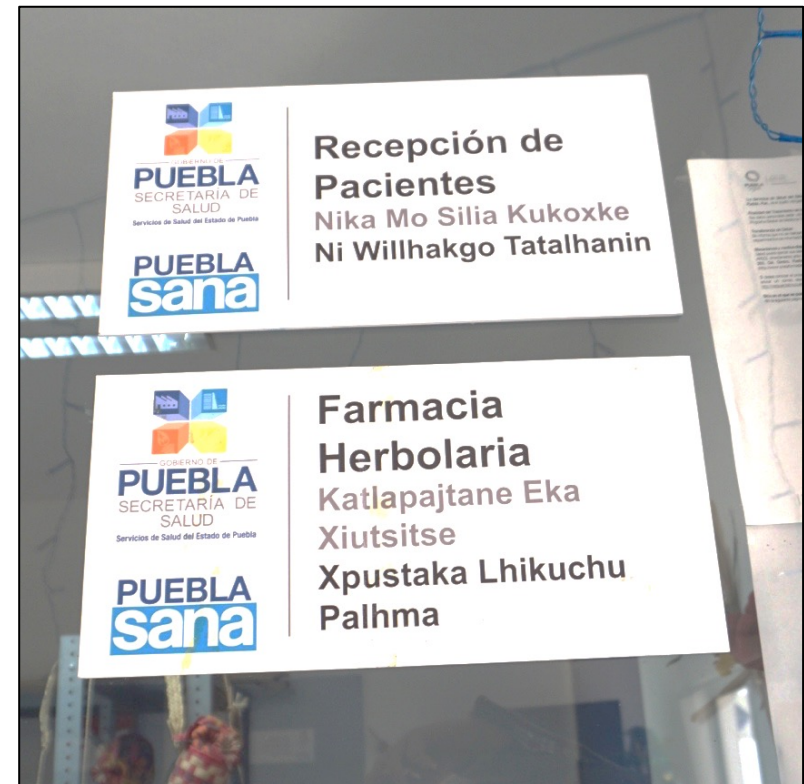
- Allegedly developed by joint work of linguists and native speakers
- However, the structure of participants raised doubts, as the majority of them were affiliated with SEP
- Many notable language activists were not invited

The issue of word division

- Nahuatl is a synthetic agglutinative language that uses both prefixes and suffixes
- In verbal inflection, for example, personal subject & object markers, indefinite object markers and imperative *xí-* are attached to the root from the front
- Non-recognition of these features in writing reveals poor understanding of Nahuatl structure and creates a disturbed view on the language (“it is the same as in Spanish”)



Signs from a hospital in Ahuacatlán, Puebla

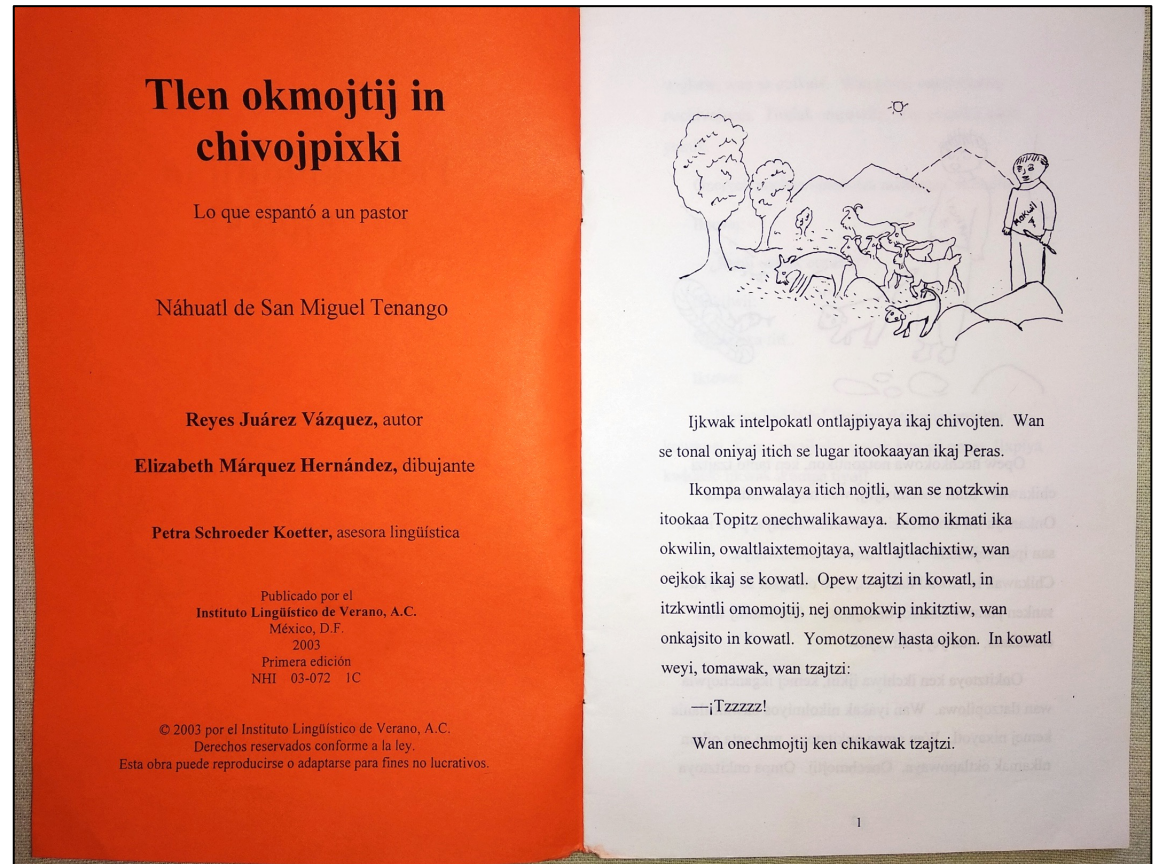


Case study: San Miguel Tenango



Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and local activists (end of 1990s - beginning of 2000s)

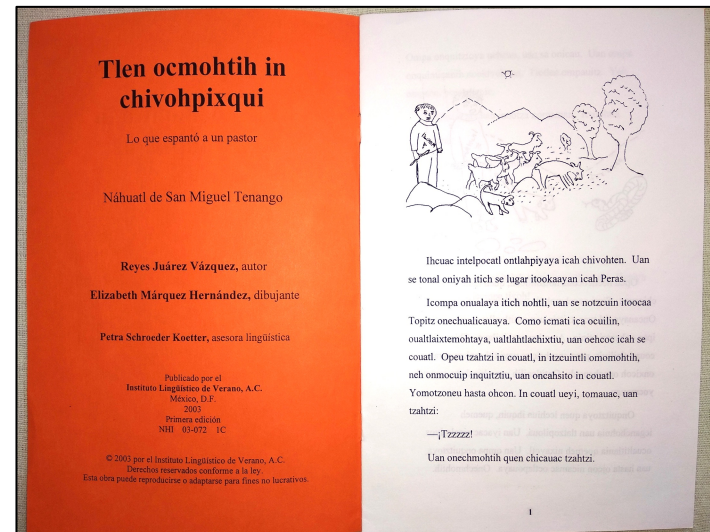
- **Writing dictionary and grammar of Nahuatl of Tenango**
- **Translation of the New Testament**
- **Publication of short stories**



Development of a new orthography by the local team (“Equipo Márquez”)

- First survey on orthography in 2004
- The results show that the population favored the classical orthography
- Only a few young persons preferred the orthography imposed by SIL
- Publication of books of stories in two orthographies
- Literacy workshops in 2010 in evangelical churches in Tenango
- 30-40 participants in each workshop, including old persons who were illiterate in Spanish

[s]	>	s
[h]	>	h
[w]	>	u
[k]	>	c, qu
[kw]	>	cu



Question about orthography in a survey on language use (Dec 2018)

Which manner of writing do you understand better or which looks better for you?

a) Zantipitzin in tlacameh huan in cihuameh

motlalo~~z~~que

b) Santipitzin in

motlalo~~s~~que

c) Santipitzin in

motlalo~~s~~keh

d) Santipitzin in

motlalo~~s~~kej i

e) Santipitzin in

motlalo~~s~~kej i

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	a – colonial o clásica	26	21.7	34.2	34.2
	b – equipo Márquez	39	32.5	51.3	85.5
	c – balanceada	5	4.2	6.6	92.1
	d – Educación Indígena	3	2.5	3.9	96.1
	e – Instituto Lingüístico de Verano	2	1.7	2.6	98.7
	Márquez o balanceada	1	.8	1.3	100.0
	Total	76	63.3	100.0	
Missing	System	44	36.7		
	Total	120	100.0		

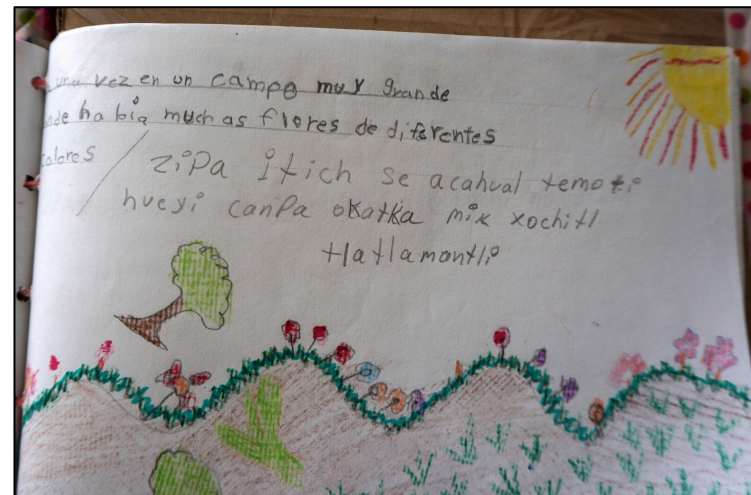
Problems with local kindergarten (writing)

1	Se	Uno
2	Ome	dos
3	Yeyi	tres
4	navi	Cuatro
5	makuil	Cinco
6	Chikuasen	Seis
7	Chikome	Siete
8	Chikueyi	Ocho
9	Chiknavi	nueve
10	majtlaktli	die
11	majtlaktli se	once
12	majtlaktli ome	doce
13	majtlaktli yeyi	trece
14	majtlaktli navi	catorce
15	Kaxtol	
16	Kaxtol uan se	
17	Kaxtol uan ome	
18	Kaxtol uan yeyi	
19	Kaxtol uan navi	
20	* Simpoal	

- The only educational institution in Tenango belonging to “Indigenous Education”
- A teacher with 25 years of work service
- Distrust between teachers and children’s parents (native speakers), including orthography issues
- Recent search for compromise

Grafías del alfabeto náhuatl.

A - Ch- E- I- J- K-
L- M- N- O- P- S- T-
U- X- Y- TS- TL



CONCLUSIONS

- Acceptance of orthography is largely a matter of custom
- If a new version of orthography is proposed, it is crucial to test it with native speakers and find out if they accept it
- People (native speakers) can be very sensitive towards writing in their language, especially if a standard is imposed from outside without consulting their opinion
- It is important not to forget that every standardized orthography implies that the language has its own grammar rules