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Writing systems

WRITING SYSTEMS OF UNWRITTEN LANGUAGES IN GUATEMALA\*

Presented by the Republic of Guatemala

Abstract

When the Spaniards first set foot in Guatemala in the year 1524, they came across a number of Indian languages, of which many are no longer in existence.

On the other hand, a great number of Spanish words have been incorporated, voluntarily or otherwise, into the 20 major languages now being spoken by Indians in Guatemala. It has been no easy task to standardize the spelling of some of these languages, especially since they have never been written down and since they show certain singular phonetic characteristics that have evolved as a result of the forces of social and historical change.

It must be emphasized that, in order to be able to grasp more fully the linguistic riches of the languages concerned, and in order to be able to use the aboriginal names in published maps, strenuous attempts to find the correct answer to the problem were made at the request of the author, who participated in all the meetings held over a period of nearly a year with the linguists and technicians of the Instituto Indigenista Nacional, the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano and other organizations operating in the country.

Even though it proved possible to invent some 20 official alphabets, the work must be considered purely experimental in nature, several consecutive models of graphic representation of our heterogeneous idiomatic system having been tried out.

It must also be stressed that the solutions arrived at are not to be considered definitive. In other words, they are valid up to the date of adoption,

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\* Prepared by Francis Gall, Guatemala.

thus leaving the way open for the introduction of changes and amendments in the future. It must also be stated that the object of the exercise is to standardize spelling and to provide teaching material for rural areas in the form of orthographic symbols which will make it possible to learn to read and write in the various native languages as they are spoken at present and, at the same time, to facilitate their subsequent adoption in the official language of the country, which is Spanish. What this means is that linguistics involved are applied exclusively to a specific task, without any pretence at providing symbols to express subtleties of enunciation that are of greater concern to the strictly scientific investigation of these unwritten languages.

With the exception of Carib, all the vernacular languages are of Mayan origin. In other words, 48 graphic symbols are used in all, even if none of the respective languages uses all those included in the general list, the majority of which represent similar sounds. In each of the alphabets the orthographic symbols that have been used are indicated, as are the sounds that are exclusive to each language, without, however, attempting to define all the phonetic and dialectical variants.

For a number of reasons, for example printing technicalities, as will be seen in the appendix to the Geographic Dictionary of Guatemala, certain variants of the Spanish sounds a, e, i, on, n, x, which are typed with a diaeresis, will be printed in italics.

The present document is an abstract and not the complete text of the relevant working paper, which has been submitted in Spanish only and should be consulted in that language. The following must be borne in mind.

It must again be stressed with the exception of Arawak or Central American Carib, the minority languages have their common origin in Mayan and are unwritten.

This means that they could be validly defined as being used by any number of people and as differing from languages recognized as national and/or ethnic.

In addition, and precisely because they are unwritten languages, certain problems arise regarding geographical material. It was on many occasions difficult to know how geographical names should be written within the areas they represent, or what orthography should be used.

The problem becomes more complex when taking various practical and cultural considerations into account. Certain conventional signs have been difficult to reproduce. There is also the fact that certain minority groups have sometimes been very jealous of their identities resisting any attempt to adjusting to a more universal annotation of the geographic names within their area. The utility of published material for the linguistic majority, as well as for foreigners, should also be considered.

It will be helpful to note the three main methods used by linguists to transcribe speech.

First there is the purely phonetic transcription, in which all sounds, or as many as possible, are annotated. Relative tone, relative accent, respiration, clature and so forth, are included.

The second method is known as phonemic transcription, in which the sounds of speech known as allophones (as well as allotones and characteristics of accent) are not shown graphically but are combined in global unities known as phonemes. This would appear at first glance to be considerably superior to the phonetic transcription and, in fact, it is so in many aspects. Two or more sounds which function as one are combined into one single symbol; the incontrastably characteristic features of tone and accent are omitted and separation of the words is observed.

The third method has a greater pragmatic value, as it is used for the publication of literature in a given language. This is designated as practical orthography. In the development of this system, certain factors such as symbols used in the national language, publication facility, teaching facility and so forth, are taken into consideration.

It is evident that a solution is near at hand. However, one or two problems remain to be solved. First, it may be difficult, impossible or very expensive to obtain linotype settings for special and/or modified symbols. It has also to be borne in mind that, even if a practical orthography of a minority language can adjust itself, up to a certain limit, to the alphabet pertaining to the national language, it is essential for all the phonemes of the minority language to be represented, in order to show its phonemic contrasts. This results in characters that have no significance for those who speak the national language.

Therefore, even if the practical orthographies lend themselves extremely well to the publication of literature in the minority languages, it is obvious that, taking it into consideration that persons who talk other languages will be using geographical material to be published, it will be necessary to make one additional adjustment.

The final step will produce what could be termed a "standardized" or "official" alphabet, in other words, one with official sanction, which is limited in all its forms to the national official language.

It is contended that the use of such standardized alphabets is the proper method for publishing geographical material where minority languages still prevail. Among other reasons, the following can be adduced:

(a) There is no need for special linotype settings, or for typewriters with special signs and/or symbols.

(b) Even if the geographical names do not appear exactly as the natives pronounce them, they will nevertheless understand the references to place names within their region.

(c) Thus, the geographical documents will be more useful for those using the national official language.

In many instances, this practice would merely legalize a de facto situation and would not therefore represent any change. Rather, it would be in accordance with

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resolution 16 of the first United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which refers to the annotation of geographic names in unwritten languages. 1/

On the other hand, certain adverse effects are to be expected from the use of standardized alphabets. The following can be anticipated:

(a) When contrasting characteristics of minority languages disappear, ambiguities are to be expected. This is a natural result of standardization but, despite the apparent difficulties, the ambiguities tend to diminish when the elements are found in context.

(b) The standardized alphabet will not conform to the practical orthography used in the literature of the minority languages, and some negative reactions from its users can be expected.

These reactions can be minimized by explaining to those using minority languages that the alphabet applies only to the geographical names and not to the language in itself, and that its use is required in view of international demands and/or requirements.

(c) Certain non-linguistic adjustment should always be carried out.

(d) The geographical names with standardized alphabets appearing in maps, dictionaries and so on, by their very nature will not carry information as to how they should appear in phonemic or practical orthographies. The standardization procedure is irreversible. This will put certain obstacles in the way of a scientist interested in geographical names for linguistic or etymological purposes. However, a partial solution to this problem may be the publication of explanatory material, as has been done already in Guatemala; this is considered to be a useful tool in the hands of the scientist who may work in areas where minority languages are spoken. It will not only enable him to write the language using either practical orthography or a standardized alphabet but it will provide him with a valuable key for the correct pronunciation of its phonemes.

On the basis of the above-mentioned facts, the author has been working actively with the Instituto Indigenista Nacional and the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano in the preparation of alphabets which will comprise the phonemic, phonetic and standardized versions. The work is considered very arduous, but with the goodwill shown satisfactory progress has been achieved bearing in mind, above all else, that the standardized or official alphabets will be incorporated into geographical documents that are to be published.

For instance, among the difficulties encountered is the use of the apostrophe or glottal stop (') in the Mayan languages. No complete agreement has been reached

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1/ See United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Geneva, 4-22 September 1967, vol. I, Report of the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.68.I.9), chap. III.

yet on this, but as matters stand at present, the glottal stop (ʔ) is used, instead of the number 7 as used improperly by Terrence Kaufman in a publication of the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (which was located in the city of Antigua, Guatemala before being transferred to its present site), on the question mark without its little dot at the bottom used by some linguists. There is also the use of double vowels, as well as the differentiation of sounds in the Spanish language by means of the letters "c" and/or "k", to mention only some of the problems encountered at the national level. This, of course, is discussed in more detail in the Spanish original of this document.

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