

THE INTERPRETERS OF HERNAN CORTES: 1519-152

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Abstract: This study focuses on the interpreters that Hernán Cortés used in the encounter between European and indigenous people in the early sixteenth century (1519-1521). Research findings on those interpreting the three languages (Mayan, Náhuatl, Spanish) during the campaign to conquer México will include information on how language skills were generally acquired, the identification of the interpreters, and observations on their linguistic competencies and the reliability of the interpretations. Among the most important interpreters whose names emerge in the chronicles of the conquest, letters and documents are those of Aguilar, Melchor and Marina. After selected samples of discourse are analyzed, the concluding remarks will identify the problems in separating historical information from that which is non-historical, attitudes toward the indigenous people observed in the discourse and chronicles, and implications to our knowledge of this period in history.

Keywords : Interpreters, Mayan, Náhuatl, Spanish, Cortes, History, Discourse

1. INTRODUCTION.

Among the four interpreters who sailed with Cortés to Yucatán on February 18, 1519 (Julián, Melchor, a Jamaican, Francisco) and the four more he would eventually use in the campaign to conquer México (Aguilar, Marina, Fernando, Orteguilla), there were six indigenous and two Spaniards (Aguilar, Orteguilla). Four interpreted Maya and four, Náhuatl. Comments on language education before the conquest, the interpreters' captivity, baptism, and many roles, precede those on their linguistic competencies (Sahagún, 1989; Todorov, 1984). Only Aguilar and Marina are noted for contributions as interpreters. Aguilar, who acquired Maya during captivity, joined the expedition on March 22, 1519 (Díaz del Castillo, 1972; Martínez, 1990;

Thomas, 1993). Marina, a slave given to Cortés on April 15, became the interpreter of Náhuatl, the language of the Mexica/Aztecs (Martínez, 1990; Díaz del Castillo, 1972; Thomas, 1993). A three-way interpretation ensued with Aguilar communicating in Maya and Spanish, and Marina, in Náhuatl and Maya. Marina, the link in all interpretations with the Aztecs, is by far the most important and enigmatic.

Arguments that none of the interpreters were linguistically competent in the languages they interpreted (Thomas, 1993) are expanded in this study. It focuses on constraints (time and domain) affecting language acquisition and evidence on the low competence of the interpreters.

2. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS.

The analysis of direct and indirect discourse, based on samples from four chronicles in Spanish by Cortés, Díaz del Castillo, and Sahagún includes: descriptions of the patterns and the type of discourse involving interpretations, the identification of speakers and hearers, and the function of repetitions. The discourse was read (*requerimientos*), memorized and recited (ritual speeches), or spontaneous (requests for basic needs and information). Reading from prepared texts and reciting ritual or memorized speeches (with or without pictographs) could facilitate manipulation through changes or omissions for "damage control" as several have suggested (Todorov, 1984; Martínez, 1990; Thomas, 1993).

3. ATTITUDES TOWARD THE INDIGENOUS.

Although there are positive comments about the indigenous people and culture in the chronicles by Cortés and Díaz del Castillo, the attitudes expressed are predominately negative and significantly biased. Affirmative comments are often followed by negative ones on physical characteristics or disorders (Thomas, 1993). The chroniclers' bias, stated directly or subtly, emerges in the generalizations and value judgments made on the indigenous. Even the way that names are handled in the chronicles is negative: inaccurate recording indicates a disrespect for and a disinterest in the individuals and their culture.

4. HISTORICAL VERSUS NON-HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

Identifying what is historical is complicated by problems like the self-interest of the chroniclers, the use of the identical sources, and the presence of members of the dominant culture in all the chronicles as authors, notaries, editors, transcribers, translators, or interpreters whose personal experiences and knowledge affect perceptions, interpretations, and descriptions of culture, events, and people (Todorov 1984; Martínez, 1990 ; de la Garza, 1994). Thus, the perspectives of indigenous informants in the chronicles on issues of the conquest may not be authentically indigenous (Todorov, 1984).

Interpretations linked to cultural differences provide insights on key events, like the date of Moctezuma's imprisonment (Martínez, 1990). Errors in dates, names, and places; bias; reliance on presuppositions; low quality and level of interpretations and communication; and other factors discussed above suggest that what is recorded is highly questionable. Yet, the primary sources of information are still the works by the conquistadors and other chroniclers. Analyses of legal documents and court proceedings are time-consuming and not always fruitful (Thomas, 1993).

5. CONCLUSIONS.

Although the possibility of communication between the Spaniards and indigenous existed from the beginning, interpretation was limited and low in quality. Observations in this study indicate that: communication was based more on the interpretation of basic signs, gestures, and behavior; spontaneous interpretation was low-quality and limited; time constraints and domain of acquisition limited linguistic competence; much of the discourse consisted of speeches that were memorized or read. Furthermore, the possibility of miscommunication; "damage control"; inventiveness; interference from authors, scribes, transcribers, orators, editors, translators, interpreters, and informants as well as reliance on these works for accounts on the conquest continue to raise questions on whether the discourse ever occurred and whether facts on the conquest are reliable. What is clear is that most of the discourse analyzed could not have been accurately interpreted by Aguilar or Marina. Although we will never know what was said on that first encounter of November 8, 1519, research on this period in history remains a fascinating challenge.

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