

Variation between Mixtec languages (Assignment)

Reconocimiento del mixteco Rev X 77

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Description

These assignments provide opportunities for students to learn and explore a few key concepts central to language documentation and description with real primary language documentation data from a 1977-1984 project studying lexical and morphosyntactic variation across the many Indigenous Mixtec (Otomanguean; Mexico) languages. Students will consider matters of orthography, dialectology, and language variation, and may be able to contribute to a volunteer effort to make digital transcriptions of these survey documents. These materials were produced through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (PW-259116-18).

Date Range(s): 1977-1983

Grade Level(s): Undergraduate; Graduate & Professional

Country(ies): Mexico

Course Subject(s): Linguistic & Language Studies; Indigenous Studies

Topic(s): Mixtec languages; Language variation; Dialectology

Language(s): English

Guiding Questions

Analysis of language data is central to language documentation efforts, but most linguistic problem sets and exercises are based on carefully selected datasets. Working directly with primary research data gives students a better picture of the difficulty of describing and analyzing languages. In these assignments, students may either consult already-prepared digital versions of the handwritten transcriptions made by a linguistic researcher during an elicitation session to complete the activities, or may make their own digital transcriptions through a crowdsourced transcription portal before tackling the activities.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will gain a familiarity with some Americanist phonetic symbols
2. Students will consider the suitability of various systems for representing tone
3. Students will be able to identify cognates within primary data and determine correspondences between non-identical cognates
4. Students will distinguish Mixtec cognates from Spanish loanwords
5. Students will consider the distribution of loanwords across semantic domains

Rights Statement

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Physical Repository: Digital surrogates of these materials are available through the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America

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These assignments on linguistics topics are meant to accompany the transcriptions of Mixtec language variation surveys collected by Kathryn Josserand and her collaborators between 1977 and 1984 in Mixtec-speaking places in southern Mexico. For most locations, there are audio recordings of the survey being elicited and handwritten transcriptions of the Mixtec-speaking respondents' translations of the Spanish prompts. The audio recordings and images of the handwritten transcriptions may be found in the [MesoAmerican Languages Collection of Kathryn Josserand](#) in the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, and digital transcriptions of a subset of these syntax surveys may be found in the [Transcriptions of Mixtec Language Surveys](#) collection at AILLA. Registration of a free AILLA account is required to view, stream, or download files from AILLA's repository. Students may also contribute to an effort to make reusable, searchable digital transcriptions of handwritten surveys through [The Kathryn Josserand Mixtec Language Surveys](#) collection at the University of Texas Libraries' instance of FromThePage. Students can register for a free account to save their transcriptions. Surveys are predominantly in Spanish and Mixtec with occasional English writing, though no prior knowledge of any of these languages is necessary to contribute.

Phonetic Symbols, Tone, Orthography

The surveys in this collection were transcribed using a variation of the Americanist phonetic alphabet, variations of which were widely used to transcribe Native American languages since the 19th century. This Americanist tradition has a counterpart, the International Phonetic Alphabet, which was first developed in Europe in the early 20th century, and has since largely replaced transcription in the Americanist tradition in many linguistics classrooms and texts. Americanist symbols remain important because of the large volume of documents produced with them, and some of these symbols have been incorporated into the official orthographies of some Native American languages.

Activity: Transcribe one page of a Mixtec syntax survey at <https://fromthepage.lib.utexas.edu/sullivan/the-kathryn-josserand-mixtec-language-surveys> or review a page of digital transcription at <https://ailla.utexas.org/islandora/object/ailla:271571>.

1. Reproduce the transcriber's Americanist notation of five words (that is, letters grouped together by spaces). Using what you know about the transcriber's notation, provide an interpretation in the International Phonetic Alphabet of the five words.

The Mixtec languages use tones to distinguish words, much like how tone distinguishes the words 'mother' (*mā*), 'horse' (*mǎ*), 'hemp' (*má*), and 'scold' (*mà*) in Mandarin Chinese. Many of the transcribers did not transcribe the tonal melody they heard using accent marks on vowels but instead drew a line tracing what they heard of the pitch of the words as they were pronounced.

2. Provide an interpretation in IPA of the tones of the five words you listed in (1).
3. Why might the transcribers have not used accent marks to represent the tones they heard in these surveys? Is there something about tone and pitch that might lead the transcriber to not make categorical judgements (e.g. "this vowel has high tone")?

Mixtec languages have been written in alphabetic writing for almost 500 years, but only recently have there been attempts to normalize and standardize the writing systems of Mixtec languages by Ve'e Tu'un Savi, the Mixtec Languages Academy.

4. Imagine that you have been asked to provide some suggestions for writing the Mixtec language you transcribed in this activity. Would you recommend that the Academy use the transcription system in these surveys as their writing system? Why or why not?
5. Normalization of a writing system means that all varieties will be written the same way. Look for the five words you transcribed in (1) in a different survey, and write them here. Do you believe that these two varieties of Mixtec could be written the same way? Do you see any challenges to a normalization?

Dialectology

[This activity could adapt well to group work: each student locates and transcribes the relevant portion of just one survey, and the students then collaborate on the rest of the activity.]

There are many Mixtec languages, but exactly how many is not clear. Part of this is because it is often very hard to determine whether two varieties of Mixtec should be considered two (very different) dialects of the same language or two (very similar) languages.

Activity: Choose three numbered survey prompts and locate their responses in three different surveys. For best results, choose prompts that are sentences, not short phrases, and pick surveys from different regions.

1. Reproduce one of the prompts and the transcriptions in the three Mixtec varieties below.
2. Identify the cognate words between the three varieties of Mixtec. Note that loan words are not cognates; most loan words in Mixtec are from Spanish, and will be largely similar to the text in the prompt e.g. Spanish *compañero* > Mixtec *kumbañeru*.
3. Identify at least five sound correspondences between the three languages. Try to find correspondences where at least one member of the set is different from the others.
4. Are two of the languages you chose more similar to each other than to the third? How?
5. Are there any words which appear in some responses but not others? Any cognate words which appear in different orders across the varieties? What might these differences suggest about the syntactic differences between the varieties?
6. Based on your comparison of the three survey responses, do you think that these three Mixtec varieties should be considered distinct languages, or dialects of the same language? Should two of them be considered dialects of the same language and the third a separate language? Justify your answer.

Loan Words

When languages are in contact with one another, words from one will be borrowed by the other. Oftentimes, trends in the kinds of words that are borrowed can shed some light on the nature of the relationships between the two languages and their speakers.

Activity: Review one entire syntax survey and note all instances of Spanish loan words in the Mixtec responses. If you do not read Spanish, look for words in the Mixtec responses that look very much like the Spanish words in the prompts (e.g. *compañero* and *kumbañeru*).

1. What Spanish loans into Mixtec did you find? What are their meanings? (Translations from free online apps are good enough, if you don't know Spanish)
2. Linguists have observed that not all words are equally likely to be borrowed from one language to another. For example, some have observed that words for nouns are more easily borrowed than function words. What kinds of Spanish-to-Mixtec loan words did you find?
3. Can you generalize about the meanings of the loanwords? Consult the [list of semantic fields](#) at the World Loanword Database for ideas of how to categorize the loanwords.
4. Given the semantic fields of the Spanish words that were borrowed into Mixtec, can you make any guesses about how and in what contexts Mixtec speakers used Spanish?