THE POLITICS OF MAYAN LINGUISTICS IN GUATEMALA: NATIVE SPEAKERS, EXPERT ANALYSTS, AND THE NATION¹

Brigitte M. French

Abstract

In this essay I examine the emergence and transformation of linguistic analysis as an authoritative field of knowledge in the context of competing nationalists agendas in Guatemala. I show how various social actors including missionary linguists, North American secular linguists, and Maya linguists are implicated in the struggle for authority in “science of language.” I argue that in these intellectual and political struggles, the awareness and participation of the “native speaker” is central to the efficacy of such analytic work and its corresponding projects of national inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords: Native speaker awareness, Linguistics, Mayan languages, National identity, Guatemala.

According to Talbot Taylor (1990), the idea that language can be the object of descriptive science continues to guide contemporary linguistic analysis, even though it emerged in eighteenth-century British empiricism. Emphasizing the perceived contemporary need for descriptive objectivity in the study of language, Taylor remarks, we “turn to trained professionals with specialist techniques: To descriptive linguists . . . If properly performed, (descriptive) metalinguistic discourse is seen to be an empirical science, with truth (as opposed to political power) as its only authority” (1990: 10). Contextualizing the belief in the “science of language,” Taylor underscores the historical construction of claims positing that authoritative analysis can be derived from the objective description of human language. Extending further Taylor’s implied link between linguistic analysis and ideology, several scholars (Silverstein 1998; Woolard 1998; Irvine and Gal 2000) have recently argued that all metalinguistic discourse, including the scholarly analysis of language, is situated in a

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented in the invited session, “Misrecognition, Linguistic Awareness, and Linguistic Ideologies,” at the 100th Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans, LA, on November 21, 2002 and The Symposium on Language Dynamics and Linguistic Diversity in Florence, Italy, on July 7, 2003. The thanks I owe for the development of this project are many. Susan Gal and those who anonymously reviewed the essay for *Pragmatics* provided insightful and challenging responses to my arguments. Nora England and members of OKMA generously introduced me to the political world of Maya linguistics many years ago and continue to be exemplars of international collaboration today.

larger socio-political field and is always impacted by ideology. For these anthropologists, the key question about linguistics is not how linguistic analysis may be related to objectivity, but rather how a belief in the scientific nature of linguistics comes to take hold as an efficacious regime of knowledge in a given historical and ethnographic context.

I wish to take up this question through an examination of the emergence and transformation of linguistic analysis as an authoritative field of knowledge in the context of nationalist agendas in Guatemala from the 1920s to the mid 1980s. In other words, I will trace the successful rise of the “science” of linguistics with a necessary “eye to the conditions that enabled it and the social interests inscribed in it” (Errington 2001: 20). Because the scientific advent of linguistics in Guatemala implicates the scholarly analysis of linguistic forms with larger political debates about national identity consolidation, my examination will rely on Gal’s position that “scholarly arguments about linguistic problems are simultaneously coded contests that propose to define the nation . . . and claims to professional expertise that can legitimately provide such definitions” (1995: 156). Following Gal’s excellent analysis of linguistic debates and nation-building in 18th century Hungary, I will attend to the emergence of linguistic analysis as an authoritative enterprise by focusing on the tripartite relationship between linguistic analysis, the social actors who position themselves as the legitimate purveyors of expert knowledge, and the process of national identity formation. Extending beyond Gal’s work, I will focus this inquiry on the epistemological distinction between expert analysts and “native speakers,” a division, I argue, that authorizes a particular construction of “scientific” linguistics with political implications for national inclusions and exclusions.

I frame this inquiry around three historical moments. First, I discuss U.S. missionary linguists who produced early 20th century grammars of Mayan languages, Kaqchikel particularly², and whose claim to expert authority rested on their explicit goal to assimilate native speakers of Mayan languages into the Guatemalan national imagined community and the Christian faith through Spanish. Second, I examine the professionalization of linguistics as a scholarly discipline in Guatemala during the 1950s. I show how Christian linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and scholars associated with the National Indigenous Institute struggled to control the linguistic analysis of Mayan languages and aligned their “scientific” endeavors with the state’s efforts to forge a homogeneous national identity based upon the erasure of cultural and linguistic difference. Finally, I conclude with an examination of Maya linguists’ struggles in the post-violence era to reconstitute expert knowledge and to re-align the scientific direction of linguistic analysis with their larger political struggle to engender a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual Guatemalan nation.

Through these three historical moments, I will argue that the powerful link between expert linguistic analysis and interested definitions of the nation hinges on assumptions about and orientations toward “native speakers” of Mayan languages. I show that so long as the “native speaker” remains the object of dominant language assimilation and is understood to have “limited awareness” of the complex grammatical structures of their languages, claims to expertise function to establish hegemonic, exclusive definitions of the

² There are twenty-one recognized Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala including: K’iche’, Achi, Mam, Kaqchikel, Q’eqchi’, Q’anjob’al, Tz’utujil, Ixil, Ch’orti’ Poqomchi’, Popti’, Poqomam, Chuj, Sakapulteko, Akateko, Awakateko, Mopan, Sipakapense, Uspanteko, Teko, Itzaj.

nation. However, an understanding of recent efforts by Maya linguists shows that when the presumed epistemology of the “native speaker” is challenged, linguistic analysis and its claims to scientific expertise can be used for the purpose of promoting alternative versions of the imagined national community.

1. Grammars, God, and the Guatemalan Nation

The history of contemporary linguistic analysis of Mayan languages in Guatemala during the early twentieth century may very well begin with the work of W. Cameron Townsend, the founder of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), also known as the Wycliffe Bible Translators, in the early 1920s.³ Townsend began his career in Guatemala in 1919 as an ambulatory Bible vendor turned proselytizer among Kaqchikel speakers in the highland communities of Patzun, San Antonio Aguas Calientes, and Comalapa (Stoll 1982). As Townsend became more involved in these areas, he became troubled that new congregations in Maya communities “were springing up around poorly apprehended Spanish Bibles” (Stoll 1982: 36). Convinced of the need to more clearly and efficiently spread the word of God in the local language, Townsend took a keen interest in Kaqchikel. Soon after, he completed its first 20th century grammar in 1926.⁴ Townsend’s Cakchiquel Grammar examines some grammatical patterns of the Kaqchikel language, including phonetics,⁵ and provides descriptive analyses of morphology, verbal prefixes, possessive pronominal prefixes, root stems, gender specific suffixes, and verbal suffixes. For Townsend, understanding Kaqchikel morphology was the key to understanding the true “nature” of the language, a language he characterized as based upon primitive roots (1961: 12). From his perspective, the essence of Kaqchikel would be iconically revealed as one learned the “primitive” roots and the corresponding inflections and derivations of Kaqchikel prefixes and suffixes. On the basis of this linguistic ideology, Townsend constructed a “slot-class tagmemic theory” of Kaqchikel in which morphemes were categorized according

³ Stoll notes that the SIL does not “consider itself a mission because its Bible translations, not its members, are responsible for any spiritual growths (1982: 5).

⁴ Townsend used this grammar as the basis for training other Christian linguistic students/missionaries for missionary work among Native Americans during the summers of 1934 and 1935 when he officially formed the SIL.

⁵ Townsend uses 32 graphemes to represent 40 Kaqchikel sounds. What is striking in Townsend’s sketch of Kaqchikel phonetics and phonology is the near absence of linguistic difference, given that Kaqchikel - like all Mayan languages in Guatemala are the languages of the Other. Instead there is strong emphasis on linguistic sameness. Much of Townsend’s analysis asserts the linguistic sameness of Kaqchikel with both Spanish and English. He informs readers of his grammar that, “The alphabet used is as close to that of Spanish as possible” (Townsend 1961: 10). In attempting to use a Spanish orthography to make written Kaqchikel look as much like Spanish as possible, he consistently draws upon the similarities between Kaqchikel phonetics to Spanish and English phonetics. Most of Townsend’s descriptions of Kaqchikel sounds are, in fact, descriptions of English phonetics. For example Townsend explains: “The letter a had two sounds: One as in ‘father’ and the other as in ‘along’. Ch is like the English ch as in ‘cheese’... l, m, n are as in English” (Townsend 1961: 10). Consequently he misrecognizes sounds in Kaqchikel that do not correspond to Spanish/English sounds, and omits sounds that are independently Kaqchikel.

to classes.⁶ Townsend explained the significance of his morphemic analysis in the following way:

The number of root words in the language is very small, but an almost unlimited number of derivatives can be formed by the use of prefixes and suffixes. Get thoroughly acquainted with the prefixes and suffixes and learn the root words and the language will be easy. One can understand words he has never heard before merely by recognizing the root and the suffix (1961: 9).

The explicit purpose Townsend assigned to this type of morphological analysis was enabling non-Mayas, particularly U.S. missionaries, to learn Kaqchikel efficiently, in order to spread Spanish and Christianity among monolingual speakers of Mayan languages. SIL linguists eventually praised Townsend's method for its applicability to many other indigenous American languages (Pike 1961), and several SIL staff produced grammatical analyses of Mayan and other languages that focused on tagmemes (Church 1961; Delgaty 1961; Elliott 1961; Pike 1982).

In Townsend's morphological (as well as phonetic and syntactic) descriptions, the semiotic processes of iconization, the transfer of an indexical relationship between language and a linked feature into a relationship perceived to be inherent, and erasure, the simplification of a linguistic field rendering some aspects invisible, (Irvine and Gal 2000: 37-38) are at work. While Irvine and Gal underscore the importance of iconization and erasure in the construction of linguistic and social difference, in Townsend's work they function antithetically to produce a perceptual *sameness* between Kaqchikel and Spanish. One of several examples can be seen in Townsend's description of the "state of being" verb in Kaqchikel, which he conjugated as,

First person sing	yin	First person plural	oj
Second person sing	at	Second person plural	ix
Third person sing	ja	Third person plural	e (or je)

Stressing an isomorphic relationship between Kaqchikel and Spanish, Tonwsend remarked:

⁶ For example, he analyzes the utterance "*Xquebencamisabetaj-ka-na-can*", glossed as "with an instrument I will go to kill them rapidly - in reference to a downward movement, and in reference to something expected and finished by that act, I will leave" in the following manner:

Xqu - e - be - n - cam - isa - be - xta - j-ka - na - can

Xqu - Future time

e - third person plural of substantive verb indicated that the objective is plural and third person

be - the verb "to go" indicated that the agent goes away in order to act

n - abbreviation of the pronominal possessive prefix *nu* indicated that the agent is singular and in first person

cam - verb root signifying "to die"

isa - causative suffix

be - instrumental suffix

xta - rapid movement suffix

j - indicator of active voice

ka - auxiliary verb indicating action in downward direction

na - auxiliary verb indicating necessary action

can - enclitic indication that the action is finished or left or abandoned

(cited in Pike 1961: 4).

“Like “soy”, “eres”, “es”, etc. in Spanish, these forms do not require the use of the nominative pronouns but may take them if desired” (1961: 13). This recurring analytic perspective relies on the erasure of substantive grammatical differences between the languages in order to produce an essential similarity between the languages.

Emphasizing the inherent “sameness” of the languages through grammatical description was the first step in facilitating Kaqchikel speakers' acquisition of and literacy in Spanish, as epitomized in the progression of Townsend's linguistic and religious projects. Townsend produced a biblical translation 14 years after he began studying and describing Kaqchikel (Hvalkof and Aaby 1981: 9), a version of the Bible that he believed “would help Indians acquire the more prestigious, advantageous tongue, whereupon parents would raise their children as Spanish speakers” (Stoll 1982: 37). This assimilationist orientation functioned to erase linguistic differences between Kaqchikel and Spanish in order to erase social differences between “Indians” and “non-Indians/Ladinos.”⁷ In turn, such attempts at erasing social and cultural differences between “Indians” and “non-Indians” in the service of Guatemalan nation-building had been an explicit part of the Ladino state goal to create a homogenous nation from the mid nineteenth century until contemporary times (Smith 1990).

Indeed, the first definite signs of a strong link between linguistic analysis and an interested version of nation building appeared in President Orellana's commendation of Townsend's missionary presence (Stoll 1982: 31) and in concomitant governmental support of SIL expertise in the analysis of Mayan languages.⁸ This link between politics and linguistics characterized the type of analysis that dominated the intellectual scene from the 1920s until the mid 1950s. It came to be challenged eventually and gradually by native speakers of Mayan languages.

The earliest challenge was issued by the work of two Maya groups formed in 1945 that offered an alternative manner of linking together linguistic analysis and politics. The *Convención de Maestros Indígenas* (Convention of Indigenous Teachers) and *Academia de la Lengua Maya Ki-ché* (ALMK) stressed Maya participation in linguistic analysis and implicated linguistics with the maintenance of Mayan languages in an increasingly adversarial national climate. Adrián Chávez, a K'iche'-Maya and a central figure in both of these organizations, argued for the development of an orthography that would represent the “uniqueness” of Mayan languages. Underscoring the essential difference of Mayan languages from Spanish, Chávez explained the need for a truly “Mayan” orthography: “[There is] the need to make a correction in the Ki'che' manuscript for which it was advisable to use a set of symbols genuinely indigenous to bring out the marvelous beauty of the old culture” (Ministerio de Educación 1985: 123).⁹ Against previous SIL Spanish-like orthographies, Chávez developed one he called distinctly Mayan, using 27 graphemes

⁷ Ladino is the Guatemalan term for the Spanish-speaking mestizo (of mixed European and indigenous descent) population.

⁸ Following this same ideology, SIL supported the use of indigenous “vernaculars” in the Americas as instrumental “bridges” to national culture and identity.

⁹ “La necesidad de hacer una corrección del manuscrito ki-ché para lo cual era conveniente un juego de símbolos genuinamente indígenas para extraer las maravillosas bellezas de la antigua cultura.”

(19 from the Spanish orthography, 1 from English orthography, and 7 “new” symbols, unique to K’iche’). Although Chávez’ orthography was used only in ALMK published materials, it marked an important moment in Mayan linguistics generally, and Mayan language phonetics and their written representation specifically. It highlighted Mayas’ belief in the essential difference of Mayan languages from the official and national language, Spanish, as well as Mayas’ interest in iconically realizing this difference in written forms.

Even though these two Maya groups contested linguistic representations of Mayan languages, it would take a few decades until Maya linguists could develop themselves into a truly oppositional force that would contest the direction of linguistics. Nevertheless, they set the stage for subsequent Maya groups, linguists and activists in the 1970s and 1980s, to challenge the dominant ideology that guided SIL and the state. As we will see, it was in the 1970’s that linguistic analysis became a site of struggle by two competing forces that mobilized it toward two distinct ends - linguistic assimilation and language revitalization. On both sides, the analytic capacity and participation of the “native speaker” was central.

2. Fixating on phonetics: The politics and semiotics of sounds

While a few Mayas began to train as teachers and to take an interest in the linguistics of Mayan languages, the Guatemalan state secured even further SIL’s authority over Mayan linguistics. The government created a new institution *Instituto Indigenista Nacional* (IIN). The explicit mission of the IIN was to “develop the scientific investigation the country’s ethnic groups to successfully achieve their promotion and integration into the national culture; and to carry out studies of the country’s indigenous languages for their literacy [in Spanish] and castellianization” (López 1989: 31). Together, IIN staff in conjunction with SIL linguists who were contracted to work with them, (Hvalkof and Aaby 1981) pursued the end to control representations of Mayan languages for the purpose of cultural and religious assimilation of Maya populations.

The collaboration between IIN and SIL precipitated in the *Primer Congreso de Lingüística* (First Linguistic Congress) in 1949, sponsored by the Ministry of Education. The meeting’s primary objective was to deal with the problem of “multiple forms of graphic representation for the indigenous languages of the country” (IIN 1950: 5).¹⁰ According to the state, multiply written representations of Mayan languages caused significant damage to the project of transforming monolingual Mayas into literate Spanish-speaking Guatemalans. The IIN reported: “So many difficulties of diverse nature have come to be accentuated when we try to arrive at the literacy of the core indigenous monolingual communities who will have to suffer the transition to a new phonemic system and its consequent representation” (1950: 5). Of the 47 conference participants addressing this problem, most “experts” were Ladinos and foreign linguists associated with the SIL. Speakers of Mayan languages were generally confined to the role of “informants,” though seven Mayas with professional positions in the IIN also attended. These discussions

¹⁰ “Tales dificultades de diverso orden han venido a acentuarse cuando se trata de hacer llegar la alfabetización a los núcleos indígenas monolingües, los cuales habrán de sufrir el paso a un nuevo sistema fonémico y a sus consiguiente representación.”

centered on the phonetics and phonology of Mam, Popti', Chuj, Q'anjob'al, Awakateko, Poqomam, Q'eqchi', Poqomchi', Chorti', K'iche' Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil (López 1989: 36). Departing from Townsend's earlier emphasis on morphology, discussants called for a vigorous investigation of Mayan languages' sound systems and for ways to represent them in written form. Pivotal in focusing linguistic analysis of Mayan languages on phonetics, the First Linguistics Congress led the way to articulating this focus as a scientific undertaking.

The proposals instituted by the First Linguistic Congress were codified in the IIN's publication, the *Alfabetos para los cuatro idiomas indígenas mayoritarios de Guatemala: quiché, cakchiquel, mam y kekchí* (Alphabets for the Four Major Indigenous Languages of Guatemala) and officialized in a presidential accord in 1950.¹¹ The orthography, phonetic, and phonological analysis presented in this governmental publication are marked by two themes. First, there is a new, explicit invocation of the objective science of linguistics as the legitimating force behind the analysis of languages. Second, there is a recurring iconization of Kaqchikel with Spanish similar to earlier linguistic/missionary work (French 2001). With this publication, then, linguistic analysis took a categorically scientific turn. Its changed direction toward science coincided with the establishment of phonetics as its new object of investigation. Even though substantively re-directed, however, linguistics continued to be guided by the same linguistic processes and political agendas that had driven its "pre-scientific" days.

The claims of SIL linguists to a scientific enterprise notwithstanding, linguistic analysis at the time did become a more vigorous undertaking than before. Unlike earlier linguistic work done by Townsend and other linguists/missionaries, technical discourse and disciplinary practices of linguistics in this era are fully instantiated in representations of Kaqchikel phonetics, phonology, and orthography. For example, in the *Alfabetos*, pronunciations of sounds are explained vis-a-vis their place and manner of articulation, as in "the /k/ represents the stop of a post-palatal sound" (1950: 14). Also, phonological rules are written, such as the rule that "the /r/ at the end of the word is retroflexive" (1950: 15). Lists of individual sounds are provided in "word initial," "word intermediate," and "word final" position, as in "/m/ muxu'x (belly button), imul (rabbit) and imam (grandchild)" (1950: 16). These new textual practices ostensibly perform value-free scientific descriptions of Kaqchikel sounds and, thus, lend authority to the SIL/IIN's particular orthographic representations. Highlighting the source of this authority, the authors justified their linguistic analysis in the following way: "This Institute also wants to make clear that we have conformed, wherever possible, to the science of linguistics" (1950: 10).¹²

That the phonetics of Mayan languages became the focus of analysis when linguistics took an overtly "scientific" turn is not fortuitous. The reasons are both political and semiotic. They are political in that regimentation of sound systems can play a central role in the formation of national identity. Indeed, the regimentation of phonetics enables the development of standardized orthographies that, in turn, facilitate the proliferation of textual materials for vernacular literacy as part of national identity formulation. As

¹¹ The alphabets for the four largest Mayan languages had a total of 58 graphemes.

¹² "Este Instituto quiere también dejar constancia de que se ha ce ñido en lo posible a la ciencia lingüística."

Schieffelin and Doucet (1994) have illustrated in Haiti, the consolidation of national identities in post-colonial contexts is often predicated upon regimenting sound systems for the production of a unified orthography that facilitates textual and social processes by which Benedict Anderson (1991) argues nations are imagined.

In addition to this political explanation, there are also semiotic reasons that may account for the co-occurrence of the scientific turn in linguistics with the advent of phonetic analysis. The focus of SIL linguists on phonetic analysis provided for them, I argue, a creative index of “expert knowledge” because phonetics, as the smallest meaningful unit of human language, is taken to be the least likely aspect of grammatical systems accessible to “native speaker” awareness. Renowned SIL linguist, Kenneth Pike, advances such an epistemological division in his 1947 text *Phonemics*:

The sounds of a language are automatically and unconsciously organized by the native into structural units. . . One of these sound units may have as submembers numerous slightly different varieties which a trained foreigner might detect but which a native speaker may be unaware of. In fact, if the native is told that such variation exists in the pronunciation of his sound units he may emphatically deny it (1947: 57).

For Pike, trained foreigners are able to detect the nuances of sound patterns in a given language while the natives remain unconscious of them. In turn, this particular construction of expertise is erected upon an a clear “scientific framing of acoustic and articulatory properties of speech” (Errington 2001: 21). In other words, phonetic analysis sustains claims to a scientific enterprise by means of an ostensibly justifiable division between expert linguists and native speakers.

Christian linguists are not alone in this orientation. The division between expert knowledge that can penetrate accurately language structure and the relational native’s incapacity for reflexive understanding of it is, as Bauman and Briggs argue, deeply rooted in secular linguistic science (2000). “One implication of this principled regimen of discounting is that the scholarly study of language has systematically organized itself around precisely those aspects of linguistic form and practice that are, or are assumed to be, most inaccessible to folk awareness or valid insight” (Bauman and Briggs 2000: 199). In particular, attention to meaningful units of sound as comprising a site that is inaccessible to native speakers’ awareness, is grounded in much of contemporary linguistic anthropology inherited, in part, from the pioneering work of Franz Boas. Boas articulated such a position in his foundational Introduction to Handbook of American Indian Languages: “A single sound as such has no independent existence, it never enters into the consciousness of the speaker. . . Phonetic elements become conscious to us only as a result of analysis” (1966: 19-20).

More recently, Michael Silverstein (1981) develops a theoretical model to account for the accuracy of native speakers’ linguistic consciousness in “Limits of Awareness:” “It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make a native speaker take account of those readily-discernible facts of speech as action that (s)he has no ability to describe for us in his or her own language” (3). Building upon Whorf’s work, Silverstein argues that the degree to which native speakers are able to articulate accurately metalinguistic (specifically metapragmatic) knowledge of their language(s) depends upon three semiotic properties. They are: Unavoidable referentiality, continuous segmentability, and relative presuppositional quality vis-à-vis the context of usage (1981: 5). In all three cases, Silverstein finds the exception that proves the rule in the sounds of human speech. For

instance, he contrasts the T/V deference vs. solidarity system as unavoidably referential with:

such pragmatic alternations as certain North American English phonetic markers of social stratification isolated by Labov in many famous studies, where the signals of socio-economic class affiliation of the speaker reside in subtle pronunciation effects within certain phonetic categories, which operate independent of any segmentation of speech by the criterion of reference (1981: 5).

Similarly, he contrasts continuous segmentability with the augmentative-neutral-diminutive form changes in Wasco-Wishram in order to exemplify another aspect of sound systems beyond native speaker awareness: "In isolating the signals of the alternation, we are isolating not segments of speech, but phonological features of some of the segments; we are not isolating thereby any units of language that themselves have referential value" (1981: 9). Finally, Silverstein concludes his discussion about the limits of native speaker awareness, by contrasting surface lexical forms with sounds and other non-segmentable aspects of structure: "The further we get from these kinds of functional elements of language, the less we can guarantee awareness on the part of the native speakers . . . Hence for the rest, the more we have to depend upon cross-cultural analysis and the accumulated technical insight" (1981: 20).

Following eminent linguistic anthropologists before him, then, Silverstein extends the conventional line of thinking according to which sound enables a line to be drawn between technical "expert" knowledge and lay speaker understanding. To the extent that we recognize this division, and look to sound and sound systems as inaccessible to the "common knowledge" of native speakers, we must also consider the argument that "expert" linguistic knowledge belongs to those who can produce metalinguistic discourse about sounds and sound systems - namely, the linguist trained in systematic phonetic analysis.

3. The *Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín*: Good science and the politics of difference

In the preceding years, as we have seen, the SIL dominated linguistic analysis, in part, through the support it received by the Guatemalan state. From the 1970s to the mid 1980s professional Mayas challenged more systematically SIL's authority to research, analyze, and represent Mayan languages with the support of secular North American linguists which engendered concomitant struggles over phonetic analyses and orthographic representations. In 1972 secular North Americans formed the *Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín* (PLFM), a Maya NGO dedicated to the analysis and promotion of Mayan languages. The early years of the PLFM were marked by the involvement of North American secular linguists, Terrence Kaufman, Nora England, Judith Maxwell, Laura Martin, and Karen Dinkin, who have become senior scholars in the field.¹³ While these scholars conducted

¹³ Other North Americans who worked as linguists with the PLFM included Will Norman, Linda Brown, Linda Munson, and John Dailey (England 2004, personal communication).

linguistic research under the auspices of the PLFM until state-sponsored violence escalated at the end of the decade, in 1975, the PLFM made a monumental step toward Maya linguistic self-determination. It became legally, professionally, and administratively Maya - the first autonomous Maya NGO dedicated to linguistic analysis.¹⁴

Mirroring the SIL's stated commitment to the scientific analysis of Mayan languages, the PLFM's centered its mission on the development of scientific linguistic research. But it also underscored - as it does to-date - a linguistic science both *by Mayas* and *for Mayas*, a goal that challenged directly the inherited model of expert knowledge by undermining the division between expert analysts and native speakers. This challenge was immediately apparent in the stated objectives of PLFM that included: "1) To be a center of technical resources in linguistics, made up of native speakers of different Mayan languages, properly chosen and trained; 2) Provide intensive and technical training for native speakers of Mayan languages with respect to the development of linguistic and education expertise, with the goal to promote the languages, endowing them with dictionaries, syntactic structure and cultural diffusion" (López 1989: 53-54).¹⁵ Explicit in the PLFM's mission was a strong inter-relation of expert knowledge, scientific analysis, and Maya professionalization in the field in which the analysts are native speakers of Mayan languages and the speakers acquire the technical expertise to become analysts. This comprised a strikingly different epistemology from that construed by SIL, which had defined the subject of expert linguistic knowledge tautologically, as the scientific linguist/analyst. Still configured around the goal of scientific analysis, the subject of expert knowledge erected by PLFM was the native speaker of Mayan languages and the member of the Maya *pueblo*, who would undergo a process of professionalization that depended on rather than denied the linguistic and cultural identity of the would-be scientific analyst. This new epistemology provided a distinct manner of linking linguistics and politics, best captured by the following words of a Maya scholar, Margarita López:

We need to define and apply a linguistic politics oriented to the promotion of Mayan languages, not as an isolated factor, but rather as a component that gives identity, strength, and continuity to the Maya people. The [linguistic] information contributes to the process of self-determination and, specifically when compared to the path of preserving Mayan languages, the majority of Mayan speakers lack the information necessary to take part in the decisions. In this way, [the linguistic information] will contribute to those directly responsible for Mayan languages, Mayas themselves, so that they may have the necessarily elements to make use of linguistic rights (1989: 9-11).¹⁶

¹⁴ Linguists worked on several Mayan languages including K'iche', Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, Q'eqchi', Poqomchi, Mam, Awakateko, Ixil, Q'anjob'al, Akateko, Jakalteko, Chuj, and Chorti (López 1989: 53).

¹⁵ "Ser un centro de recursos técnicos en lingüística, integrado por hablantes nativos de los diferentes idiomas Mayas, debidamente seleccionados y entrenados. Proveer entrenamiento técnico e intensivo a hablantes nativos de idiomas Mayas respecto al desarrollo de habilidades lingüísticas y educativas, a fin de promover los idiomas dotándolos de diccionarios, estructuración sintáctica y proyección cultural."

¹⁶ "Necesitamos, entonces, definir y aplicar una política lingüística orientada a la promoción de los idiomas Mayas, no como factor aislado, sin como componente que da identidad, foraleza y continuidad al Pueblo Maya... La información contribuye a este proceso de autodeterminación y específicamente, en cuanto al camino que seguirán los idiomas Mayas, la mayoría de mayahablantes carece de la información necesaria para tomar parte en las decisiones... De esta manera contribuir a que los directamente responsables de los

Guided by the political vision of Maya cultural autonomy, PLFM linguists developed a new orthography for Mayan languages in 1976 that would consolidate Mayan linguistic struggles for self-determination around linguistic difference.¹⁷ Along with a scientific method informing their written representation of the sounds of Mayan languages, PLFM also posited principles of “rationality,” some of which had already been developed by North American secular linguist, Terrence Kaufman, for the purpose of creating orthographies for Native American languages. Invoking these principles, PLFM linguists argued against using the Spanish writing system to represent Mayan languages, which they regarded as marred by several “irrational” aspects. They showed, for instance, that the phoneme /k/ was irrationally represented in the Spanish alphabet by several characters: c, qu, and k (López 1989: 58).

Along with principles of rationality, the PLFM put into practice the following criteria for developing alphabets: 1) All of the letters and combinations of letters that indicate a single phoneme have to be pronounced; 2) each phoneme should have its corresponding written form (letter or combination of letters); 3) each phoneme should be written in one way and not in various ways (López 1989: 56).¹⁸ Through these criteria, the PLFM sought to establish an isomorphic relationship between an individual sound (phoneme) and its written representation (grapheme), as well as to posit this relationship as sound linguistic analysis based solely on rational principles. Successful in perfecting earlier attempts by Maya professionals such as Chávez to establish the linguistic difference of Mayan languages through iconization, PLFM’s efforts illustrated, as Irvine and Gal put it, how “the iconicity of the ideological representation reinforces the implication of necessity” (2000: 37-38). In effect, the PLFM created a process for attaining a regimentation of the sound systems of Mayan languages, which would establish linguistic difference on a scientific and rational basis, and which would pave the way for making assertions of cultural difference by native speakers/analysts.

4. Applied linguistics and the politics of assimilation

The success of the PLFM became evident as early as in the late seventies, when SIL/IIN linguists, shifting their earlier position, began to challenge “scientific” linguistics from the perspective of “applied” linguistics, in order to bolster their own phonetic analyses and orthographies for the purpose of Spanish linguistic assimilation. In 1977, SIL linguists published *The Alfabetos de las lenguas mayances* (The Mayan Language Alphabets)

idiomas Mayas, que son lon Mayas mismos, tengan los elementos necesarios para hacer valer los derechos lingüísticos.”

¹⁷ The complete alphabet had 61 graphemes.

¹⁸ “1) Todas las letras y combinaciones de letras que indiquen un solo fonema tienen que ser pronunciadas. 2) Cada fonema debe tener su correspondiente forma escrita (letra o combinación de letras. 3) Cada fonema debe ser escrito de una sola manera y no de varias.”

through the San Carlos National University.¹⁹ In it, the authors made explicit their particular political orientation, and posited as the ultimate end of their linguistic analyses the transformation of monolingual Mayas into literate Spanish speakers and readers. Reversing their earlier claims conducting scientific analyses of Mayan languages, they shifted their orientation to a more “practical” one that would best facilitate the dissemination of Spanish literacy among Maya peoples. SIL linguists claimed to “work exclusively in applied linguistics for teaching, or rather, without pretending to symbolize subtleties of pronunciation that would only be of interest to rigorously scientific investigation” (IIN 1977: 11).²⁰ Following this new position, Marilyn Henne, Associate Director for Academic Programs in the Central American Branch of the SIL, criticized Maya linguists’ phonetic analyses and graphemic choices as contrary to “instrumental use of the alphabets for preparing materials necessary to the bilingual education program” (1991: 4). Furthermore, Henne charged that in the context of increasing Maya scholarly expertise in linguistics, Maya linguists’ “preoccupation with practical decoding and pedagogical issues appears irrelevant” (1991: 5).

5. The Mayan Languages Academy of Guatemala and linguistic self-determination

As state-sponsored violence against Maya communities began to subside in rural areas, The *Segundo Congreso Lingüístico Nacional* (Second National Linguistic Congress) convened in the city of Quetzaltenango in 1984.²¹ Markedly different from the First Congress, this gathering of experts included Maya linguists, missionary linguists, North American secular linguists, elite Ladino scholars, and military personnel, all of whom jointly addressed the effects of multilingualism in Guatemala and debated language planning.²² Several recommendations were made at the conclusion of the four-day conference, of which the

¹⁹ This publication, the most inclusive and extensive version produced by the SIL/IIN, presented 48 graphemes to represent: Achi of Cubulco, Achi of Rabinal, Awakateko, Kaqchikel, Chorti’, Chuj, Itza, Ixil, Popti, Q’anjob’al, Q’eqchi’, Mam, Maya-Mopan, Western Poqomam, Poqomchi’, K’iche’ of Quetzaltenango, K’iche’ of Sacapulas, Tz’utujil, Uspanteko, and Caribe.

²⁰ “Lo qual significa que se trata exclusivamente de lingüística aplicada a la labor docente, o sea, sin pretender simbolizar sutilezas de enunciación que sólo pueden interesar a la investigación rigurosamente científica.”

²¹ The IIN organized the Congreso to continue pursuing the same state interest in linguistic analysis that was established in the First Congress in 1949. It also sought to reflect upon *indigenismo*, the study of Indigenous peoples, in Guatemala and elsewhere in the Americas (Ministero de Educación 1985). Seen in this light, the Second National Linguistic Congress was organized to address how linguistic research, and its bearing upon on-going state concerns, could best deal with the Maya Indians in the continuing search for a collective national identity.

²² In addition to IIN officials, the Organizing Commission was made up of several other governmental officials from agencies including the Institute of Anthropology and History, the Fine Arts Council, and the Ministry of Defense. The committee was advised by a specially-appointed Advisory Committee which included Wesley Collins, representative of the SIL, Stephen Elliot of CIRMA, Guillermina Herrera of the URL, Adrián Chávez of the ALMK, and Narciso Cojtí of the PLFM.

most significant for the linguistics of Mayan languages was the recommendation to create a new institution that would deal specifically and exclusively with the analysis and promotion of Mayan languages in Guatemala. The recommendation called for: "The creation of a Mayan Languages Academy made up of linguists, especially speakers of Mayan languages" (Ministerio de Educación 1985: 147), a proposal that underscored the importance of "native" speaker participation in indigenous linguistic analysis. The first official responsibility of the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* (Mayan Languages Academy of Guatemala or ALMG), as an autonomous Maya institution, would be "to study in detail linguistic, pedagogical and other aspects of the proposed alphabets for each language" (Ministerio de Educación 1985: 147), a responsibility that signaled the political urgency of regimenting Mayan languages' sounds into an authoritative graphemic representation.²³

With this recommendation, the struggle between SIL/IIN linguists and Maya linguists over who would be the legitimate experts on Mayan languages and who would produce the most authoritative linguistic, particularly phonetic, analyses and orthographic representations, shifted. It was a shift that was both monumental for and contested by multiple linguistic experts. Nora England recalls Maya and secular linguist enthusiasm: Almost a hundred Maya met in 1987 to establish criteria for the selection of the alphabets for their languages. Secular North Americans were invited to present their technical expertise, but were excluded from voting (1996: 183). Subsequently, Christian linguists of the SIL started an intensive propaganda campaign against the newly founded Maya linguistic self-determination. "Their tactics included promoting letter- and petition-writing campaigns supposedly initiated by rural Maya . . . to broadcasting a number of radio advertisements against the alphabets which said, among other things, that now people's Maya last names would be misspelled and mispronounced, and ultimately to making a "human rights" complaint about the alphabet" (England 1996: 184).

Yet, Maya linguists and scholars look to the official recognition of the Unified Alphabet, and the subsequent officialization of the ALMG in 1990, as a substantial victory in their struggle for linguistic self-representation, self-determination, and cultural pluralism. It is a struggle that continues in the face of national homogenizing projects. *Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib'* (OKMA), an NGO dedicated to linguistic analysis formed by a group of young Maya linguists who received training in scientific descriptive linguistics from Nora England in 1988 and 1989, explained the significance of their research in the following way:

Knowledge of the social, linguistic, and cultural reality of the Guatemalan state is a must for all of its inhabitants . . . Guatemala is a multicultural and multilingual country, a reality that is unknown or rejected by many people. The Maya nation, that forms the majority of the population of the country, possesses its own values that constitute a great human richness. Among those strongest values that are found are the twenty Mayan languages spoken today (1993: 1).

Since the development of the ALMG, Maya scholars continued to use linguistic analyses (and print technologies) to bring their vision of the new multiethnic, multicultural, and

²³ "La creación de la Academia de las Lenguas Mayas integrada por lingüísticas, especialmente hablantes de idiomas mayas. Dicha academia tendría que estudiar detalladamente los factores lingüísticos, pedagógicos y otros aspectos de los alfabetos propuestos para cada idioma."

multilingual Guatemalan nation into being. Maya linguist “Raxche” Demetrio Rodríguez Guaján articulated the connection between a new multicultural Guatemalan national community and democratic principles in a recent analysis of Kaqchikel neologisms:

Mayan languages are testimonies of the will to be and to continue being a people by the Mayas of today. The new times that Guatemala is beginning to live, particularly in the formulation of rights, rights that will particularly benefit new generations of Guatemalan Mayas (Kaqchikel Cholchi' 1995: 7).²⁴

With the creation of the ALMG, the struggle of Maya linguists to become legitimate agents in a state-sponsored institution is nearly over. Yet, the political struggle that had long guided their pursuit for public and official recognition continues. In a climate where the Guatemalan state continues to look at Maya people and Mayan languages as folkloric resources - as markers of national diversity and attractions for tourists - it falls to Maya linguists to infuse their work with substantive notions of multiculturalism and democracy.

6. Conclusion

As I have attempted to show, the proposal to create an autonomous governmental agency dedicated to Mayan languages was part of a thread that for several decades continued to unfold in response to a persistently perceived need for expert linguists and scientific linguistic analyses. Throughout this continuous thread, which extended along the development and consolidation of a scientific perspective on linguistics in Guatemala, there are several reasons why one may wish to question the perceived status of linguistics as a science, or to scrutinize the various claims made to lend authority to this status. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that it was by upholding the scientific paradigm of linguistics that Mayan analysts were able to change the direction of linguistics for explicitly political ends. While it may be true that Mayan linguists, as much as their SIL/IIN counterparts, misrecognized the science of linguistics as the legitimate epistemology for the regimentation of Mayan languages, it is also true that such a misrecognition was key to their successful efforts in guiding linguistics away from the once-dominant, state-sponsored practices directed at eradicating cultural and linguistic difference and aimed at forming the Guatemalan nation around an exclusive and homogeneous vision.

References

Anderson, Benedict (1991) [1983] *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

²⁴ “Los idiomas mayas son testimonios de la voluntad de ser y seguir siendo un Pueblo, por parte de los mayas actuales. Los nuevos tiempos que está empezando a vivir Guatemala, particularmente el planteamiento del Derecho... Derechos que beneficiarán particularmente a las nuevas generaciones de mayas guatemaltecos.”

- Asturias, Miguel (1923) *Sociología guatemalteca: El problema social del indio*. Guatemala: Universidad Nacional de Guatemala.
- Bauman, Richard, and Charles Briggs (2000) Language philosophy as language ideology: John Locke and Johann Gottfried Herder. In Paul V. Kroskrity (ed.), *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 139-204.
- Boas, Franz (1966) [1911] Introduction. In Preston Holder (ed.), *Handbook of American Indian Languages by Franz Boas and Indian Linguistic Families North of Mexico by J.W. Powell*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 1-79.
- Church, Clarence, and Katherine Church (1961) The Jacalteco noun phrase. In Benjamin Elson (ed.), *Mayan Studies I*. Norman, Oklahoma: Summer Institute of Linguistics, pp. 159-170.
- French, Brigitte M. (2001) Language ideologies and collective identities in post-conflict Guatemala. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa.
- Delgaty, Colin C. (1961) Tzotzil verb phrase structure. In Benjamin Elson (ed.), *Mayan Studies I*. Norman, Oklahoma: Summer Institute of Linguistics, pp. 83-122.
- Elliott, Ray (1961) Ixil (Mayan) clause structure. In Benjamin Elson (ed.), *Mayan Studies I*. Norman, Oklahoma: Summer Institute of Linguistics, pp. 129-142.
- England, Nora C. (1996) The role of language standardization in revitalization. In Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown (eds.), *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 178-194.
- Errington, Joseph (2001) Colonial linguistics. In *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Palo Alto, California: Annual Reviews Incorporated, pp. 19-39.
- Gal, Susan (1995) Lost in a Slavic Sea: Linguistic theories and expert knowledge in 19th century Hungary. *Pragmatics* 5.2: 155-166.
- Henne, Marilyn (1991) Orthographies, language planning, and politics: Reflections of an SIL literacy muse. *Notes on Literacy* 65: 1-18.
- Hvalkof, Søren, and Peter Aaby (1981) *Is God an American? An Anthropological Perspective on the Missionary Word of the Summer Institute of Linguistics*. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.
- Instituto Indigenista Nacional (1950) Alfabeto para los cuatro idiomas indígenas mayoritarios de Guatemala: Quiché, Cakchiquel, Mam, and Kekchí. Guatemala: Editorial del Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- Irvine, Judith, and Susan Gal (2000) Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In Paul V. Kroskrity (ed.), *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 35-84.
- Kaqchikel Cholch' (1995) *Rukemik K'ak'a' Taq Tzij: Criterios para la creación de neologismos en Kaqchikel*. Guatemala: ALMG.
- López Racquec, Margarita (1989) *Acera de los Idiomas Mayas de Guatemala*. Guatemala: Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes.
- Ministerio de Educación (1985) Informe del congreso lingüístico nacional. Guatemala: Ministerio de Educación.

Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib' (1993) *Maya' Chii': Los Idiomas Mayas de Guatemala*. Guatemala: Cholsamaj.

Pike, Kenneth (1947) *Phonemics: A Technique for Reducing Languages to Writing*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Pike, Kenneth (1961) Foreword. In Benjamin Elson (ed.), *Mayan Studies I*. Norman, Oklahoma: Summer Institute of Linguistics, pp. 3-82.

Pike, Kenneth (1982) *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Schieffelin, Bambi B., and Rachelle Doucet (1994) The "real" Haitian Creole: Ideology, metalinguistics, and orthographic choices. *American Ethnologist* 21.1: 176-200.

Silverstein, Michael (1981) *The Limits of Awareness. Sociolinguistic Working Paper Number 84*. Southwest Education Development Lab., Austin: Texas.

Silverstein, Michael (1998) The uses and utility of ideology: A commentary. In Bambi B. Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity (eds.), *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 123-145.

Smith, Carol A. (1990) Introduction: Social relations in Guatemala over time and space. In *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540 to 1988*. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 1-30.

Stoll, David (1982) *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire: The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America*. London: Zed Press.

Taylor, Talbot (1990) Which is to be master?: The institutionalization of authority in the science of language. In John E. Joseph and Talbot J. Taylor (eds.), *Ideologies of Language*. London: Routledge, pp. 9-26.

Townsend, W. Cameron (1961) Cakchiquel grammar. In Benjamin Elson (ed.), *Mayan Studies I*. Norman, Oklahoma: Summer Institute of Linguistics, pp. 3-82.

Woolard, Kathryn (1998) Introduction: Language ideology as a field of inquiry. In Bambi Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity (eds.), *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-47.