

## The History of the Transcription of the Mayan Languages

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The European invasion of the Americas was a momentous event. It had both immediate and longlasting effects on the lands and people encountered, in every sphere imaginable: economic, political, social, biological, cultural, and of course linguistic. In this paper we focus specifically on the Spanish 'incursion' into Central America, land of the Maya. It is certainly true that the existing Mayan political and cultural configuration was thereby upset. Yet it would be superficial to dismiss the Conquest as an example of one culture overwhelming another. Not only does this mischaracterize the event as having had only (or at least mainly) immediate impact, but it also implies that all the 'doing' was done by the Spaniards, to the Maya; in other words, that the interaction was one way. That this is a false impression becomes clear when we examine the history of the transcription of the Mayan languages.

Though literacy was not widespread in the pre-Conquest era, the Maya had a long tradition of writing. According to Bartolomé de las Casas, a 16th century Dominican, Mexicans and other Mesoamericans had histories, books of dreams and auguries, books of dates, books of ceremonies, and books about the naming of children (HILL, 1992:128). However, prior to the Conquest, the only written form of Mayan was hieroglyphic. The language of the Classical inscriptions is thought to be an early form of Cholan (SCHELE, 1982:8 ; THOMPSON, 1972:24-25), though as Thompson notes the Dresden, Madrid and Paris codices were probably written by Yucatec speakers. Thus only a portion of the family as a whole was represented. Post-Conquest, all Mayan languages eventually came to be written down. Initially this was through the efforts of Spanish friars, though there are early texts written by Mayans trained by the Spaniards as well<sup>1</sup>. The padres arriving from Spain were expected to learn Mayan, and approximately half did (according to SCHOLLES and ROYS, 1938:586). The historian Diego Lopez Cogulludo states that some mastered Maya

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these early Mayan writings (written using the Spanish orthographic systems, though mostly in the Mayan languages) consisted of legal documents such as wills, bills of sale, and dynastic histories such as the Annals of the Cakqchiquels, produced to provide the Mayans with proof of land ownership. It is significant that these documents should be written in Mayan. As Hill points out, the Mayans used alphabetic writing, which they got from the Spanish, while rejecting the Spanish language and by projection the conquerors themselves. From the earliest days of the Conquest the Mayans have asserted their cultural and linguistic identity, in this way and others.

completely: he says of Diego de Landa, who later became bishop of the Yucatan, "He who learned it most quickly and with most perfection was the saintly Father friar Diego de Landa, of whom one can say (not without admiration) in a few days he spoke it and preached in it as if it were his own language" (quoted in TOZZER, 1966:69-70). Many who learned the languages for ecclesiastical purposes- preaching, translation of the Bible, etc.- also wrote grammars, dictionaries, and vocabularies. In reducing spoken Mayan to the written word they had sometimes to invent new conventions to represent unfamiliar sounds. Notably, there were glottalized ejectives, uvular stops, and dental affricates which must have sounded strange to Spanish ears. One Spanish friar, Francisco de la Parra, devised unique symbols to represent these sounds- the '*tresillo*', '*quatrillo*' and so on (see chart below). Gradually, over the first hundred post-Conquest years, two alphabets came into use: one for the Yucatekan languages and most others, and another for highland languages such as Kaqchikel. The consonant symbols are as follows<sup>2</sup> :

I.P.A.	Col. alphabet	Col. alphabet,		
	Yukatek, Tzeltal K'ekchi, Chontal <sup>3</sup>	Kaqchikel <sup>4</sup>		
[b]	b	b		
[p]	p	p		
[p']	pp≈p			
[t]	t	t		
[t']	th, th			
[k]	c, qu	c, qu		
[k']	k	4		
[q]		k		
[q']		ε	Tozzer	Swadesh
[ç]	tz	tz	ts	tz
[ç']	ɔ	4	ts'	dz
[č]	ch	ch	tš	ch
[č']	ch	4h	tš	ch'
[s]	ç, z	ç, z, f		
[š]	x	x		
[h]	h			

For the most part, the early grammars cited were accurate, phonologically speaking. The important phonemic distinctions were maintained (though vowel length was often ignored).

Later grammars, notably those of the 18th and 19th centuries, tended to be lower in quality. Many were based on the earlier grammars, with no advance in scholarship. In addition, the old symbols which had been introduced to represent the 'new' Mayan sounds had been lost, leading to much confusion and inaccuracy, particularly as regards the velars and uvulars. Brinton (1885) chided Brasseur de Bourbourg for using only Latin symbols: "He made use only of the types of the Latin alphabet; and both in this respect and in the fidelity of his translation, [of the Popol Vuh] has left much to be desired in the presentation of the

<sup>2</sup> Notice that many symbols are due to Spanish writing conventions-such as **c/qu** for [k].

<sup>3</sup> Motul dictionary 1590 ; Moran/Gates 1695/1935 ; Coronel 1620 ; San Buenaventura 1684 ; Vienna dictionary 1600 also Ara/Guzman 1571/1616 (Tzeltal) ; anonymous 1583 (K'ekchi) ; Scholes/Roys 1614 (Chontal) (source: Dienhart, 1989:139-195).

<sup>4</sup> Guzman 1704 ; Moran/Gates 1695/1935.

work" (p.52). (Brinton, by the way, is the only "modern" scholar to use the old de la Parra symbols).

In fact, during the 20th century the situation grew even more confused as far as transcription systems were concerned. While some Mayan scholars adopted the old Colonial alphabet, most used some sort of phonetic script in some cases rather idiosyncratic. Bricker in 1986 found it necessary to include the following statement in her grammar of Mayan hieroglyphs: "Knowles' **ä** corresponds to Bruces' **Λ**<sup>9</sup>, Hofling's **i**, and MacLeod's, Warkentin and Scott's **Λ**' equals **ʔ** between and directly following vowels. **c** equals **k**, **ch** equals **č**, **u** equals **w**, **x** equals **š**, and **j** equals **h**. Fought's **&** represents w with first and second person prefixes and y with the third person prefix" (p. 21).

Not only Western academics used different systems. Various Mayan institutions, such as the Instituto Indigenista Nacional, the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín, etc. devised their own alphabets. As early as 1949, when the first Congreso Lingüístico Nacional was held in Guatemala, the subject of standardization of the writing system of Mayan had been discussed. In 1950 one alphabet was proposed for the four largest language groups: Kaqchikel, K'iche', Mam, and Kekchi. In 1961 a special alphabet was promoted for K'iche' by the Academia de la Lengua Maya K'iche'. The Instituto Indigenista Nacional published a pamphlet entitled *Alfabetos Oficializados de 13 Principales Idiomas Indígenas de Guatemala* in 1962. In 1976 there appeared two new proposals for pan-Mayan alphabets, both advocating new (and different) changes. In consequence, in 1984 those attending the Congreso Lingüístico Nacional decided to form the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, which among other things would be responsible for standardizing the written form of the Mayan languages. At that time, there were basically 3 alphabets in use by the Mayans (again, only consonants are given):

IIN	PLFM	ALMK	ALMG
b/b'	b/b'	ᵇ	b'
c/qu	k	k	k
c'/q'u	k'	Y	k'
k	q	ƶ	q (1988)
k'	q'	ƶ'	q'
ch'	ch'	≠	ch'
t'	t'	d	t'
tz'	tz'	z	tz'

(source: ALMG pamphlet, published 1989)

The Academia, which consists of representatives of eleven institutions<sup>5</sup>, decided on the symbols given in the 4th column above. Some Spanish conventions were eliminated- notably the **c/qu** for [k]- and special symbols such as those used by the ALMK were eschewed in favour of phonetic symbols and common spellings (such as **ch** for [č]). The process of discussing and deciding which symbols to use took two years, from 1986 to 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Asociación de Escritores Mayances de Guatemala; Academia de la Lengua Maya K'iche'; Centro de Aprendizaje de Lenguas, Universidad de San Carlos; Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica; Instituto Guatemalteco de Educación Radiofónica; Instituto Indigenista Nacional; Instituto Lingüístico de Verano (suspended); Oficina Regional del Altiplano Educación Extra-Escolar; Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín; Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe; Instituto de Lenguas de la Universidad Rafael Landívar.

Of interest at this point in our discussion is the very fact that the scholars in the institutions mentioned, many of whom were Mayan (though not all)<sup>6</sup>, were interested in creating one alphabet. (As we have seen, Western scholars of Mayan clearly did not share their concern). There were six rationale given for the establishment of the alphabet, as follows:

- 1) didactic: the new alphabet was simpler and less redundant than the former ones- again, the elimination of c/qu was given as an example. Rather than having four symbols for two sounds- c/qu, c'/q'u- only two would be used: k/k'.
- 2) pedagogical: it was pointed out that bilingualism would be facilitated by the use of the same alphabet for all Mayan languages.
- 3) linguistic/sociolinguistic: the phonemic principle, whereby one phoneme = one symbol was invoked; it was stated that the unification of the linguistic community would be achieved through the use of one alphabetic system; in fact the claim was made that the standardization of the Mayan writing system lent respect and value to the phonology of the native tongues, and at the same time promoted the identity of the linguistic community.
- 4) psychological: security born of the recognition of the identity of the phonemes of their mother tongues was cited here as the rationale.
- 5) socio-political: the establishment of one alphabet would eliminate, it was thought, the atomization and separation of the different linguistic communities.
- 6) economic: having only one alphabet would save on editing and printing costs. (source: ALMG pamphlet, published 1989).

It is obvious, upon examining these rationale, that the Mayans had very different reasons for wishing to write in their languages than did Western academics. In fact, in the last two centuries, Western scholars with very few exceptions have written about the Mayan languages, not in them. The Mayans needed to write their languages for pedagogical purposes, for scholastic purposes, and for pride in their culture; adopting one alphabet facilitated this for the reasons given above. Western academics, in the typically Western way, separated the languages from their cultural matrix and analyzed them in the interest of furthering scientific knowledge<sup>7</sup>.

As we have seen, twice in the history of the recording of the Mayan languages a consensus has been reached as to how they would be written: first by the Spanish padres, and second by the Maya themselves. Though the first alphabetic systems may appear to be a cultural and linguistic imposition, it must be kept in mind that the Mayans appropriated these systems for their own use, very early after the Conquest. While the Spaniards were busy transcribing the Mayan languages in order to convert their speakers, the Mayans were in their

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<sup>6</sup> The non-Mayan scholars- mainly linguists- in organizations such as CIRMA, PLFM, etc. are engaged in activities such as training Mayans in linguistics so that they can analyze their own languages, collecting literature and providing study facilities for Mayans, etc. For instance, the PLFM has been holding classes in linguistics for Mayans since 1971; by 1989 they had graduated 5 classes. Their goal is to promote the writing of Mayan grammars by and for Mayans.

<sup>7</sup> It must be mentioned that many grammars written about various Mayan languages contain lengthy prefaces acknowledging their 'subjects', and giving ethnographic data about them. Nonetheless these are books published in English, in the West, and are therefore quite inaccessible to the normal Mayan. Western linguistics has come under attack for this; see the England article mentioned for a more detailed discussion.

turn busy learning the new system in order to defend themselves against their conquerors and preserve their heritage. The diagram following illustrates in a very rough manner the 'stages' in the transcription of the Mayan languages:

A	CONQUEST - 1700s	one (or 2) alphabets	<p>W- teaching the gospel, teaching Mayan to other priests, Bible translations, conversation with parishioners</p> <p>M- histories; wills; deeds; alphabetic renderings of codices<sup>8</sup></p>
B	1700s - 1960s	MANY ALPHABETS	<p>W - grammars, scholarly works, articles</p> <p>M- pedagogical materials; legal documents</p>
C	1960s - PRESENT	pan-Mayan alphabet	<p>M- political/administrative materials, pedagogical material, grammars, literature</p> <p>W- scholarly works, grammars</p>

It must also be kept in mind that in cases A and C most of the writing in Mayan was done by people living in a Mayan-speaking area and functioning in Mayan. The proliferation of transcription systems in B are due to Western scholars using whatever system best fit their needs.

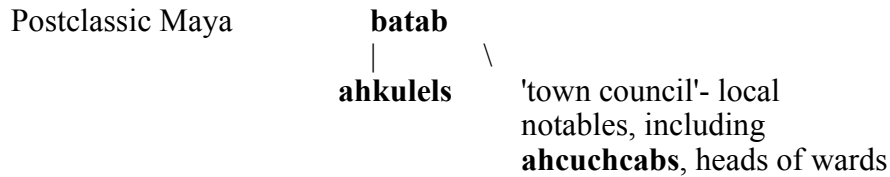
Having given the history of how the Mayan languages have been recorded up until the development of the Mayan alphabet, we now turn our attention to interpreting these developments in light of the larger sociolinguistic and ethnographic picture. We have noted the fact that Mayans in 1986 saw fit to devise their own alphabet; we now examine briefly how it came to be needed and by whom. In fact, by the 1980s, there existed several organizations (some of which have been mentioned) founded by Mayans or non-Mayans working alongside Mayans. (In addition there were other institutions, funded by the government or missionary-oriented, who also worked with Mayans and whose activities were centred around Mayan languages). That these organizations existed is fundamentally due to a long tradition of Mayan resistance to Spanish rule. The maintenance of their culture and peoplehood is unusual, especially in comparison with what happened elsewhere in the Spanish New World, and deserves discussion.

In examining the history of the Mayans under the Spanish from the 15th century to the present, it is easy to focus on the imposition of taxes, the decimation of the population through disease, the forced displacement of Mayan peasants and the theft of their land, and the *encomienda*/*repartimiento* system. In short, it is easy to assume that Mayan society was turned topsy-turvy as was Andean and Mexican society. However, to a great extent, Mayan society survived in the sense that the central concepts and principles persisted. Society, or what Nancy Farriss calls the 'cultural configuration' was not unmodified by the coming of the Spaniards but it changed in Mayan ways. As a brief example, we have only to look at the

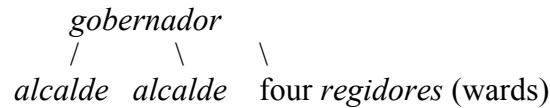
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<sup>8</sup> See Karttunen (1992) for a more detailed discussion of the types of documents produced by the Mayans of Yucatan in the post-Conquest years.

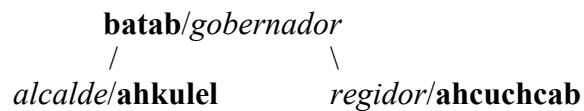
structure of political power in Postclassic times as compared to that of the Colonial regime soon after the Conquest (the example given is for the Yucatan, but is readily transferrable to other regions: )



Colonial version: *cabildo*



These two power structures are very similar, though it should be mentioned that the correlation is not absolute; **batab** and *gobernador* powers differed.



(source: FARRISS, 1984)

Farriss also points out that the same powerful families whose members had served as *batabs* provided *gobernadores* (at least at first).

Another well-documented example of Mayan assimilation to Spanish rule is in the area of religion. Saints introduced by the Spanish priests merged with local deities; *cofradías*-religious beneficent societies first established in Spain for the welfare of widows and orphans, the upkeep of the church, burial of church members, etc.- became a peculiarly Mayan institution, serving among other things as a means to protect Mayan lands and Mayan funds from Spanish rapacity.

It is not intended to belittle Mayan sufferings at the hands of the Spanish. Certainly life was not easy after the Conquest nor was it the same as it had been before. The central point being made here is that the Mayans, far from being crushed, found ways to accommodate to and even subvert the Spanish regime. Although by now they have lost all vestiges of political autonomy beyond the local level, for 500 years most have stubbornly refused to relinquish their languages and their ways even in the face of strong societal pressure ('ladinoization') and physical intimidation.

The explanation for Mayan resilience in the face of Spanish oppression is found in the nature of Mayan society itself. Farriss points out that the Mayans were accustomed to be conquered, whether by neighbouring city-states or invading Mexicans. They therefore possessed the mindset to adjust to the Spanish conquest. In addition, the famous Mayan cyclical view of time viewed the Spanish as temporary players on the Mayan stage; again, even if it proved not to be true, this was a useful coping mechanism.

It is thus not surprising that organizations such as the *Academia de la Lengua Maya K'iche'* and the *Asociación de Escritores Mayances de Guatemala*, etc. came into being. More are formed all the time. Karttunen (1992) reports that a Tzotzil Maya writer's cooperative was founded in 1982 in San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico, which not only publishes works by its members but also runs a puppet theatre and literacy program in schools. It is also not

surprising to find that other, Western-founded organizations such as PLFM and CIRMA should exist, where North American linguists and Mayans work together on research into Mayan. One might argue that the Westerners had a large hand in bringing these organizations into being- which is certainly true- but the keenness of interest on the part of the Mayans, and the degree to which they take part, is notable.

The original title of this talk was "Taking Back Their Own: The Sociolinguistic Implications of the Standardization of Mayan Orthography". It was changed to "The History of the Transcription of the Mayan Languages" because it became clear as research progressed that the Mayans had never given up their languages in any sense, even if they were subjected to 'outside' analysis. In fact, the situation today in linguistics in Guatemala is more in the hands of the Mayans than ever. In her article entitled "Doing Mayan Linguistics in Guatemala" (*Language* 68 #1 1992:29-35) Nora England presents the educated Mayan point of view, which is that linguistics is not just a scientific and scholarly inquiry. Linguists coming from abroad (the author is an example) tend to take for granted their right to analyze a language; the idea of seeking the speakers' permission seems antithetical within the bounds of scientific research. However, the Mayans point out, any work done on the language of a politically subordinate group such as themselves must be evaluated in terms of its motives, its goals, and its consequences. They do not wish to be exploited, nor endangered. At the 11th Taller Maya in Quetzaltenango in 1989 questions such as the following were raised: "Why are foreign linguists interested in Mayan linguistics? What goal does the research done by foreigners have in their own country? Does knowledge of the Mayan languages contribute to the subordination of the Mayan population? Is it possible for the foreign linguist to contribute seriously to the total elimination of the distinct tentacles of internal and external colonialism that currently envelops the Maya? Do we need foreign linguists?" (ENGLAND:30-31).

Clearly these are questions posed by a people who have a strong sense of identity, of which their languages form an integral part. In this light it is hardly surprising that the Mayans have established their own writing conventions. The Maya, though supposedly conquered some 500 years ago, have nonetheless resisted their subordinate status, in the realm of linguistics as elsewhere.

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