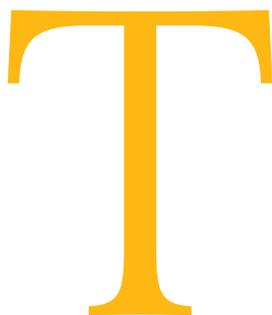


Latin American Indigenous Language Research

by NORA C. ENGLAND



THE CENTER FOR INDIGENOUS Languages of Latin America was established at the University of Texas in 2001 in response to several key ideas. First of all, linguists have become increasingly aware of the precarious status of the languages they work on, as rapid language shift threatens the continued existence

of a large number (some estimates say up to 90 percent) of the approximately six thousand languages that are spoken in the world. This is certainly true of Latin America, where all of the indigenous languages show signs of language shift and many are no longer spoken at all. Second, language is central to the identity of many indigenous Latin American communities, and is almost universally ignored or relegated to an inferior status as merely “cultural patrimony” or the like in most Latin American states, even those such as Bolivia or Guatemala where a majority of the population speaks one of these languages natively. Only Quechua in Peru has official status, and even there this is a status largely without any real governmental support. Third, the health and future status of a language depend crucially on the community of speakers and the decisions they collectively and individually make about using the language with their children, other family members, neighbors, and friends, in public spaces as well as private ones, with outsiders as well as insiders.

These ideas and observations led the Department of Linguistics, especially then Chair Anthony C. Woodbury, to propose, along with Joel Sherzer of the Department of Anthropology, the creation of the Center for Indigenous Languages of Latin America as a means to address issues regarding language abandonment and consequent disappearance in Latin America. The initial rationale for the center was that it could contribute in a more organized way to the basic documentation of Latin American languages, which collectively comprise around 15 percent of the languages of the world and constitute, especially in the Amazon Basin, one of the areas of greatest language diversity, both genetic and structural, anywhere. The thorough documentation of the languages contributes to our knowledge of how our intellectual capacity—specifically human language—functions, adds to our knowledge about human history, and helps us understand those elements of human society that are grounded in specific linguistic expression. The University of Texas already was known and well regarded for its contributions to language description and documentation through both the Linguistics and Anthropology departments, and of course for its strength in Latin American Studies. As the idea for the center developed, it became clear that two crucial and interconnected principles should be added to the original idea of basic documentation of endangered languages: 1) that projects in documentation should be carried out cooperatively with communities of speakers, and that 2) a focus of graduate education in this area should include native speakers of Latin American languages as well as the more traditional student body of non-speakers.

Carrying out documentation projects in cooperation with communities of speakers implies designing those projects to serve purposes of direct

Language is central to the identity of many indigenous Latin American communities, and is almost universally ignored or relegated to an inferior status as merely “cultural patrimony” or the like in most Latin American states, even those such as Bolivia or Guatemala where a majority of the population speaks one of these languages natively.

Chol, K'ichee'), Otomanguean languages (Chantino, Zapotec), Chibchan languages (Kuna), and Quechua. We also have on average 20–25 graduate students who are working actively on the analysis of Latin American indigenous languages. Second, we have had three quite different projects, all with major funding, that have involved UT students and faculty in cooperative ventures with each other, with communities of speakers, and with scholars from elsewhere. Each one has been quite different in the specifics of design, but all have created research teams and have been carried out in collaboration with communities of speakers. Third, the center has begun a biennial conference that is unique in the United States. It has been held three times, with Latin American participation ranging between 45 and 60 percent and indigenous Latin American participation steadily increasing from 15 to 25 percent. Conference papers are presented largely in Spanish, and the conference has become known as a major venue where scholars who work on Latin American languages can come together and exchange ideas. It furthermore has provided an unequalled opportunity for speakers of the languages to begin to present their own research in an academic setting and to begin to establish scholarly networks well beyond their home communities and countries.

The three research projects have been designed to meet the research goals of their PIs and research personnel, but they also have been conceived of as constituting new models for research collaboration, not only with other scholars and with a PI's own graduate students, but also with the communities in which they take place. A brief synopsis of each follows.

1) Iquito Project, Peru

This project was created by anthropology graduate students Chris Beier and Lev Michael in response to a request from the Iquito community to help provide them with materials for language education and revitalization. Iquito is a highly endangered language of the Peruvian Amazon with twenty-five elderly speakers. The project began with minor funding for the four graduate students who participated in its first fieldwork season in 1992, and then secured major funding from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) of SOAS, University of London (PI Nora England, co-PIs Chris Beier and Lev Michael). It has involved

interest to the communities. In many cases this means using some of the time and resources that are available to a project in applying linguistic knowledge that is acquired through basic research to such matters as the creation of educational materials, teacher training, linguistic outreach, or the construction of basic language resources for the community. It also implies using Spanish or Portuguese for the “link” language in bilingual and descriptive materials, rather than English. It further implies storing materials in ways such that they are accessible to community members in the future. In this regard, the creation of the Archive of Indigenous Languages of Latin America (directed by Joel Sherzer and Anthony Woodbury and managed by Heidi Johnson) at UT has provided the ideal long-term storage situation, since it is a permanent digital archive that can be consulted by anyone with Internet access (at <http://www.ailla.utexas.org>). While not all indigenous communities have such access, an increasing number do and many more will in the near future.

Focusing on graduate education for native speakers of Latin American languages starts with the principle that native speaker linguists have a stake in the future of their own

languages, have intimate insider knowledge of the dynamics of the community that can contribute substantially to the success of programs in language preservation, and can be leaders in language revitalization in ways in which no outsider can hope to be. In addition, native speakers can work on very difficult problems of linguistic analysis with great sophistication. Furthermore, indigenous Latin Americans have had severely limited access to higher education, a situation we hope to help mitigate in the area of linguistics. Since Latin American indigenous languages lack almost any sort of institutional support where they are spoken, strong graduate education for some of the speakers can begin to bridge that gap by providing academic institutional support and by training leaders who may be able to increase the possibilities for other institutional support at home.

The creation of the Center for Indigenous Languages of Latin America at UT has resulted in three notable achievements. First, we have the largest number of indigenous Latin Americans enrolled in graduate programs in linguistics (including linguistic anthropology) of any U.S. university. They currently include speakers of Mayan languages (Q'anjob'al, Mam,

twelve graduate students (nine from UT and three Peruvians), four native speakers, and two community language specialists and has produced a large text collection, a draft of a dictionary, a draft of a grammar, and various educational materials for the community. One of its most important contributions was in providing fieldwork training for all of the graduate students involved. Six M.A. and three *licenciatura* theses were produced as a result of student participation in the project, and two doctoral dissertations are currently in progress. The project has been noteworthy in two respects: it was established initially as a direct response to a community request for help, and it has been an entirely graduate student initiative, with faculty playing only a minimal support role.

2) Mayan Project, Guatemala

This was a project in the documentation of four Mayan languages, Uspanteko, Sakapulteko, Teko, and Awakateko, directed by Nora England and supported through an ELDP grant to England for two of the languages and a grant from the Norwegian Embassy to a Guatemalan linguistic research institution, OKMA (Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib') for the other two. It created a lexical database, a text database, and grammars for each of the languages and resulted in the publication of three grammars and four dictionaries. Subsequent funding also resulted in the creation and publication of pedagogical grammars in three of the languages. Besides England, one UT linguistics graduate student, B'alam Mateo, worked on the project, as did four Mayas who, as linguists, headed the research teams for each language, and eight community members who were trained in linguistics and worked on the materials for

their own languages. One of the team leaders, Telma Can, subsequently has begun the graduate program in linguistics at UT. One unique aspect of the project was that the team leaders, all speakers of a Mayan language, wrote grammars of languages they themselves did not speak. B'alam Mateo went on to secure funding for dissertation research on his own language (from ELDP and NSF) and created his own team of research personnel consisting of community members to whom he taught grammatical structure, fieldwork methodology, and transcription techniques. The Mayan project is unusual because it was entirely designed and implemented through collaboration between Maya-speaking linguists and England, and all of the personnel except for England were native speakers of Mayan languages.

3) Chatino Project, Mexico.

This project was begun by Anthony Woodbury and two Chatino graduate students, Emiliana Cruz (Anthropology) and Hilaria Cruz (Linguistics). After several summers of fieldwork on minimal funding, the project has secured major funding from the ELDP. Besides the two Chatino graduate students, four other graduate students are involved with the project, as well as Woodbury's high school-aged daughter and Emiliana Cruz's daughter. The project is documenting four different varieties of Chatino and has been very active in teaching literacy and language structure to Chatino teachers. This project has, like the Iquito project, provided field training to graduate students and has as a goal, like the other projects, the comprehensive documentation of the language, with text databases based on video and audio recordings, lexical databases, and grammars of each variety studied. The unique aspect of this

project is that it began through the efforts of the two Chatino graduate students, who were committed to promoting literacy, education, and language revitalization in Chatino, and was then shaped by their interactions with Anthony Woodbury, who became committed to the language and the project through his initial role as a graduate supervisor for Emiliana Cruz.

Through these projects and the *Conference on Indigenous Languages of Latin America* we also have established strong continuing relationships with some of the Latin American institutions that have an interest in indigenous languages, such as the Universidad Mayor de San Marcos in Peru, OKMA in Guatemala, and CIESAS and the Universidad de Sonora in Mexico. The projects also illustrate well our general goals:

- 1) To contribute to the documentation of Latin American languages.
- 2) To respond to community interests in their own languages.
- 3) To contribute to language preservation.
- 4) To contribute to graduate education for Latin American indigenous students.
- 5) To design and test new models for cooperative projects that can accomplish these goals.
- 6) To contribute better linguistic description and analysis, better trained linguists, and more conscientious scholarship in the field of linguistics.

Nora C. England is Dallas TACA Centennial Professor of Linguistics and Director of the Center for Indigenous Languages of Latin America. ☀



Left to right: 1) Mayan Project: Telma Can (UT student) recording with Catarina Ajchicú in Uspantán, Guatemala. 2) Iquito Project: Lev Michael (UT student) working with Iquito speaker Ema Llona. 3) Chatino Project: Emiliana Cruz (UT student) working with young Chatino speakers in Teotepac, Mexico.