THE STORY OF Ö: ORTHOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL POLITICS IN THE MIXE HIGHLANDS

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Abstract

This paper describes recent efforts to develop and promote a standardized Mixe orthography that can serve as the vehicle of a unified, modern Mixe polity. It then analyzes the guiding assumptions and ideological commitments that have informed these efforts. Ironically, this drive for a single unified spelling system has focused negative attention on precisely those features that distinguish one variety of Mixe from another. Moreover, failure to reach any consensus has frustrated the efforts of Mixe writers and teachers and made it possible for Spanish to gain a greater foothold in Mixe schools. One of the most rancorous debates has involved a certain scandalous diphthong that happens to be an innovation but one that diverges from Spanish phonology. The role of this sound in the sound system of Totontepecano Mixe and its function as an exponent of certain key grammatical distinctions that need to be graphically represented in some fashion has become less of an issue than the indexical linkages between ö and different discourses about the nature of Mixe identity - from whence it comes and how it might continue to remain distinctive.

Keywords: Orthography, Language ideologies, Mixe.

To say alphabet is equivalent to saying a collection of graphic symbols that satisfy (and must satisfy) the needs of the Mixe speakers themselves. For this reason, each letter, each symbol ought to respond to our vision and our decisions about our language, as a vital part of our culture… That is to say, our Mixe life has produced our language and our language expresses our life, our culture.¹

1. Introduction

This essay grew out of a particular frustration that I experienced during my field work in and around the Sierra Mixe in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. When I began my research in the town of Totontepec, my intention was to employ the official Mixe

orthography whenever possible. This orthography had been worked out by a committee of experts from various Mixe communities, representing all of the different Mixe variants. It was meant to be, among other things, a homegrown alternative to the alphabets used by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), which the committee viewed with great suspicion. I had two principle motivations for using this official orthography rather than employing IPA symbols, SIL orthography or developing my own spelling system. I wanted to show my support for the work of local linguists and educators. I also wanted my essays on Mixe language and culture to be readily accessible to interested Mixe scholars and policy makers. And so, despite my misgivings about certain spelling choices this was exactly what I set out to do.

Unfortunately, every time I presented a new text to my local colleagues - eager for their approval - I was informed that the regional orthography committee had convened in the interim and had voted to change the spelling. I was then told that my spelling was incorrect, or, at the very least, somewhat dated. The first time that this happened I was surprised, but I quickly accommodated. After several additional rounds of changes, I became more and more discouraged. Over the course of four years, one particular central unrounded vowel (that hovers somewhere between the sound represented by the International Phonetic Alphabet’s carat symbol and its schwa symbol) went from being spelled with an <ä> to an <ë>, briefly to <ü>, and then back to <ë>.\footnote{I use angle brackets when referring to orthographic symbols, e.g. the letter <i>, and italicized type to represent uttered sounds and speech.} A more troublesome case, is a diphthong, heard only in Totontepecano Mixe, that begins in a more or less central and unrounded manner and then glides further back and picks up some rounding (similar to the vowel heard in the English word “yo-yo”). Its spelling was switched back and forth between <o> and <ö> several times before the Totontepecano members of the committee settled on <ö>. Some Mixe spelling experts representing other communities are still reluctant to grant it official recognition.

While my Mixe interlocutors perceived this process as one of steadily circling in on the “correct” way to spell their language, I began to recognize it as the outcome of a process that might never come to a satisfactory resolution as long as the underlying political and ideological differences that drove it remained intact. More importantly, I realized that my own frustration merely echoed that of other Totontepecanos. The first and only person to teach a course on Mixe writing at the local high school in Totontepec had decided to quit after one change too many. He explained to me that it was not worth the trouble, adding that perhaps he would try again someday… when the orthography committee reached a definitive agreement.

In theory, it should not be too hard to develop a practical orthography for any one variety of Mixe. Although Mixean languages feature complicated phonologies, their phonemic inventories are not very large or typologically unusual. The difficulty is that the label “Mixe” refers not to a single linguistic code but to a cluster of languages that share a common history but have diverged considerably since Oaxaca Mixean began splitting apart some eight or nine centuries ago.\footnote{See Wichmann (1995) for a detailed overview of the Mixe-Zoquean language family.} Likewise, the Mixe people - for all of their shared
experiences and cultural assumptions - have yet to allow their desire for national unity to get in the way of sometimes bitter local rivalries. While this pan-Mixe writing system is explicitly intended to aid in the “erasure” of internal divisions both social and sociolinguistic (Irvine and Gal 2000), it has instead brought certain tensions between Mixe communities into sharper focus.

In what follows, I provide a brief analysis and discussion of this two decade-long effort to design a unified Mixe alphabet and the linguistic ideologies that have guided its development. As such, this case study is intended as a modest contribution to the growing body of literature on the linguistic ideological entailments of representing language in print (e.g. Fenigsen 1999; Haviland 1996; Jaffe 1996; Preston 1985; Ochs 1979; Schieffelin and Doucet 1994; Winer 1990) and on the standardization of language (e.g. Silverstein 1987).

As the now familiar refrain goes, language ideologies are never just about language. And so this is not just a story about a scandalous diphthong that speakers of Totontepecano Mixe spell with the letter <ö> adorned by an umlaut. It is about the speakers who employ the symbol <ö> and about what their neighbors think of them, and ultimately it is about competing visions of the role of language in Mixe society.

I should also add that I walk a fine line here, because I do sincerely want to support Mixe efforts to promote writing and literacy and the vision that underlies these efforts. However, I feel obliged to point out that certain guiding assumptions held by the people charged with the task of designing a Mixe alphabet have led to unintended and undesirable consequences. These consequences include confusion and frustration on the part of would-be Totontepecano writers and educators, and a failure to develop adequate pedagogical materials during a period of time that has seen a sharp rise in Spanish-Mixe bilingualism and a slow decline in the percentage of Mixe children and teenagers who are socialized to speak Mixe. As long as Totontepecano parents continue to view education as a primary factor in the future success and prosperity of their children and as long as that education is essentially carried out in Spanish this trend will continue. Nor do I intend to take this opportunity to propose my own neat solution to the problem of Mixe spelling, because the Mixe authorities have made it quite clear that they want to solve it on their own, and have consistently rejected proposals by well-intended outsiders (e.g. Valiñas 1983).

2. The moral high ground

A recurring theme in texts written about and written by Mixe people is the relationship between language and altitude. The name that Mixe speakers use to refer to themselves and to their language, Ayuuk, is derived from the roots *ław* ‘mouth’ and *yuk*, which means ‘up above’ or ‘mountains’. In a recent essay two Mixe ethnolinguists named Margarita Cortés and Benjamín Maldonado (1999: 100) translate Ayuuk as ‘the Sacred Word’, explaining that as Mixes they see their mountains as sacred places.

Virtually every description of the Mixe region (e.g. Nahmad Sittón, Salomón, ed. 1994) begins by noting that it is divided into three altitudinal zones, the Highlands (1800-2200 meters above sea level), the Midlands (1200-1600 meters above sea level) and the Lowlands (300-1000 meters above sea level). This three-way division reflects differences in agricultural practices, settlement patterns, political orientation and language use, too. Lowland dwellers do indeed speak a distinctive form of Mixe, as do the Midlanders. In the
highlands two very distinct kinds of Mixe are spoken. The southern half of the Highlands zone is made up of a league of five municipal districts\(^4\) whose residents speak distinct but mutually intelligible variants of Highland Mixe. The northern half consists of a single large municipal district named Totontepec, with a head town bearing the same name and nine satellite communities. Totontepecanos speak a form of Mixe that is intelligible to no other group of Mixe speakers.\(^5\)

At least, this used to be the conventional wisdom about Mixe geography. I have been surprised to see that a number of recent publications coming out of the Southern Mixe Highlands (e.g. Villanueva Damián 2000) and the newest map posted on the Servicios de los pueblos mixes (SER) website have all reassigned Totontepec to the Midlands.\(^6\).

\(^4\) A league of towns that includes Ayutla, Tamazulapan, Tlahuitoltepec, Mixistlan and Tepuxtepec.


\(^6\) The map in question can currently be viewed at: http://www.laneta.apc.org/rci/ser
I do not believe that anybody would claim that Totontepecanos have been speaking Midland Mixe all this time, or otherwise acting in concert with the Midlanders, or even that the altitude of Totontepec had been mis-measured. Rather I suspect that this new portrayal of Mixe cultural geography reflects the belief of the increasingly culturally and politically dominant people of the Southern Highlands that there ought to be only one variety of Mixe associated with the Highland zone. That is to say, they literally - and figuratively - want to claim the high ground for themselves.

This gerrymandering is a small part of a larger internal political struggle over control of symbolic (including linguistic) resources in the Mixe Region. Ultimately, it has to do with the question of which variety of Mixe (if any) can stand as an emblem of the entire Mixe nation, a nation conceived of very much in the Andersonian (1991) sense. Or can the Mixes envision a society that embraces diverse ways of being and speaking Mixe? For the Southern Highlanders, particularly those most heavily invested in indigenist politics, Totontepec has always been a thorn in their side. Its relative autonomy and historical openness to outsiders (Zapotecs, Chinanteecs and Europeans) have never sat well with them. Totontepecanos are frequently accused by their neighbors of being vindzêðûjû (‘green-eyed’), i.e., “too white.” For Totontepecanos, many of whom are vocal advocates of Mixe unification, the problem is how to achieve pan-Mixe unity without giving up everything that is distinctively theirs. Nor do they want to be seen capitulating to their southern neighbors, whom many of them do, in fact, look down upon (both literally and figuratively).

3. Mixean vocalism

According to the SER website, the unified Mixe alphabet is practically a done deal. They note with confidence: “To date, there have been great advances, and an alphabet has been put together, only lacking agreement over three letters…” 7 What remains unsaid is that people have been arguing about the same three letters since the project first began. And all three disputed symbols involve sounds that are vowel contrastive in Totontepecano Mixe.

Mixe consonants vary little from one place to another. The vowels are another story, and each Mixe community has its own unique inventory. These distinctive vowel sounds are often the sole exponents of several grammatical categories including aspect, transitivity

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7 Here is the complete original text, from which this excerpt was taken: ... Un área en el cual se ha puesto atención es en el desarrollo de la lengua escrita, proponiendo la integración de un alfabeto unificado. Hasta la fecha existe un gran avance y se ha llegado a conjuntar el alfabeto falando solamente tomar acuerdo sobre 3 grafías, en los últimos 6 años se ha trabajado de manera muy intensa para socializar entre los jóvenes y niños la escritorelectura del mixe y ha sido con gran éxito, hay suficientes fundamentos para poder desarrollar estudios más especializados. Esto último, a través de talleres de capacitación, de seminarios que denominamos Semanas de Vida y Lengua Mixes... [italics added for emphasis]
and clause type. The underlined segments in the following three items from Totontepecano Mixe exemplify a few of the relevant contrasts:  

(1)  \(\text{\textipa{\textg{kp} \text{\textx{h} \text{\textx{a\textu{\texty{y}}}}}}\text{\textx{\textx{\texty{u}}}}\text{\textx{\texty{y}}}}\)  ‘the person is dying’

\(\text{\textipa{\textx{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\text{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\)  ‘the person is not dying’

(2)  \(\text{\textipa{\textx{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\text{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\)  ‘cold’

\(\text{\textipa{\textx{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\text{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\)  ‘it’s really cold!’

(3)  \(\text{\textipa{\textx{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\text{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\)  ‘dance!’

\(\text{\textipa{\textx{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\text{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}}\)  ‘Maggie danced (recently)’

In several cases these distinctions cannot be ignored or reliably inferred from context. They ought to be graphically represented in some fashion.

All of the present day vowel inventories of Oaxacan Mixe are descended from a proto-Mixe-Zoquean system that featured six vowel qualities and contrastive vowel length. Schematically:

(4) front central back

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>hi</th>
<th>*i</th>
<th>*i</th>
<th>*u</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>*e</td>
<td>*a</td>
<td>*o</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the Zoquean side of the family this six vowel system was maintained but phonemic length was lost. In Oaxacan Mixe, distinctive length was conserved, but the vowel system underwent a series of reconfiguring changes set in motion by stress shift and the syllabification of glides. The shifts took place as Oaxacan Mixe was splitting apart, and they played out a little differently in each community.

In the Lowlands and Midlands the original system remains basically intact, though actual pronunciation varies from place to place (Bickford 1984, 1985; Van Haitsma & Van Haitsma 1976). In the Southern Highlands, each community developed a slightly different set of vowel qualities, and in some cases a seventh and even eighth phoneme emerged when the word-final high vowels that triggered raising of the preceding vowel were desyllabified.

In Totontepec the phonemes /i/ and /a/ stayed more or less in place while the other four developed a split between a higher allophone - [e], [ə], [u] and [i] - heard in stressed syllables preceding high front vowels, and a lower allophone heard in all other stressed contexts - [æ], [ɔ], [θu] and [θ]. When the segments that conditioned this alternation were  

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8 A few of the symbols I use in these examples are place-holders that I would like to replace with IPA symbols for the final version of this paper: <\textg{>} = a glottal stop, <\textx{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}> = a low back vowel (‘backward o’), <\textx{\textx{\textx{\textx{\texty{y}}}}}> = mid-central to back-rounded diphthong.
lost, this split became phonemic. This ought to have resulted in a new 10-vowel system, but because the lower allophone of /i/ ended up being indistinguishable from the higher allophone of /o/ the final tally was nine. Schematically:

(5) proto-Oaxacan Mixe: *i *a *i *o *e *u

\[ \begin{array}{c|c|c|c|c|c|c} \hline i & a & i & o & e & u \\ \hline \end{array} \]

Tototontepecano Mixe:  i a i o e æ u œū

At some point the vowel currently written <ö> came to be pronounced as a diphthong, beginning in a central position and becoming rounded as it glides backward.

Apart from their grammatical function, vowel sounds have become the most salient sociolinguistic indexes of the different groups of Mixe speakers who utter them. This was most often explained to me in terms of differences in *tono* (‘tone’ or ‘accent’). In answer to a question such as “how could you tell that so-and-so was from Pi:gθhm?” a typical response would be: “you can tell by his toono.” When pressed for more explicit details my Mixe interlocutors would imitate other peoples’ vowel qualities. If you were to ask anyone from the Mixe region about how people from the town of Totontepec speak, that person will inevitably volunteer this classic minimal pair, with an admonition about getting the pronunciation just right:

(6) ṭəuk ‘dog’

ʔɔk  ‘grandmother’

That is, “dog” written nowadays with an <ö> and “grandmother”, written with an unadorned <o>.

4. Toward a unified Mixe alphabet

Previous efforts to create a writing system for Mixe have met with only limited success. A sustained writing tradition has yet to emerge. During the colonial period there was only one systematic attempt to develop and employ a spelling system. Its author, a Dominican friar named Agustín de Quintana, produced a Mixe grammar, a confessionary and a small collection of hymns and prayers in the 1720s and 1730s. Quintana neatly summarized the challenges posed by Mixe vocalism in a section of his grammar called “Of Diphthongs and their Necessity.” Because the Dominican order was forced to withdraw from the Mixe region shortly after Quintana’s retirement, his writing system ended up forgotten. In the

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9 All surviving legal documents generated in the Sierra Mixe during this period (1572-1822) were written in either Spanish or Nahuatl (Chance 1989).
1950s and 1960s the Summer Institute of Linguistics began working on Mixe and eventually produced a number of dictionaries and biblical translations. The orthographic choices they made, designed to be practical and accessible, were never adopted by Mixe writers for their own purposes. And while they drew from a common set of alphabetic symbols and diacritics, they employed them in distinct ways for each of the four Mixe varieties that they worked on. This came to be viewed by a number of Mixe intellectuals as a component of a divide-and-conquer strategy. In the words of the 1983 “Instrumentación de la educación básica mixe” report: “Because of the great diversification of the letters used, in different conditions and with different meanings, it is easy to deduce, too, that the work of the SIL has been the linguistic and social fragmentation of our communities” (Acunzo 1991: 176).

The idea of a unified alphabet, designed by Mixe linguists for Mixe purposes, was first proposed during a 1979 regional summit. This alphabet would be a vehicle of Mixe unification and part of a larger initiative to take local control of public education. It would pointedly not be created in order to fulfill any state agenda (Valiñas 1983). The *Manifiesto al pueblo mixe*, drawn up during the summit, asserted that “unity is, without discussion, the most important thing that we have to achieve” (Acunzo 1991: 138). It argued that without it, Mixe society would eventually be torn apart by internal fighting and lawlessness. Nor would it be able to successfully petition for resources from a disinterested federal government. The authors of the manifesto went on to exclaim:

> We deliver this manifesto to all the Mixe Communities so that they might reflect and think that only united will it be possible to change our situation. We must think that nothing can impede the union of those who live in the Highlands, the Midlands and the Lowlands. If someone opposes it, or does not understand the situation, then he is simply an ally in the service of our enemies (Acunzo 1991: 139).

Shortly after the summit, the Committee for the Defense of Mixe Resources (CODREMI) was established. Its mission was to help put an end to the depredations of local political bosses and to organize Mixe responses to the external threats posed by the government, missionary groups and big business. The name of the organization speaks to a certain defensive stance that is said to be characteristically Mixe. This attitude toward the outside world is embodied in the figure of their culture hero (and logo), *Kondoy* ‘the burning king’, who set their holiest mountain aflame in order to prevent its capture by invading Zapotecan armies.

Eventually the CODREMI was succeeded by a non profit organization called the *Servicios de los pueblos mixes* (SER). SER, with its office in Oaxaca City and staff of lawyers, is currently the most prominent and well-positioned pan-Mixe organization. It does everything from providing legal representation for Mixe litigants to working with agronomists on improving crop yields. SER is an intentionally less confrontational name than CODREMI, one that suggests a willingness to collaborate with other entities when doing so can further the Mixe cause.

The specific work of designing the new Mixe alphabet has been carried out by a task force made up of local bilingual elites, including cultural promoters, intellectual leaders and ethnolinguists. They either volunteered for the work or were chosen to represent their home communities.
The story of ñ: Orthography and cultural politics in the Mixe highlands

communities. Over the years they have issued a series of status reports. The bottom of the final page of their very first report concludes with this remarkable exhortation:

Our fight for five centuries
The forests and other riches are ours
We know how to be united
Our language is not difficult to write
We are a People with a future. May we not forget it

The first line invokes the Colonial and post-Colonial past, while the final line addresses the future. Mixe writing (a symbolic asset) is listed in parallel with the riches of their forests and fields (their material assets). Fittingly, an affirmation of Mixe unity comes in the very middle of this exhortation.

From the start, the alphabet task force recognized that in order to unify Mixe spelling they would have to deal with Mixe variation. I believe, however, that they seriously underestimated its extent and their successors continue to do so today. Even if they could put together a set of symbols that captures all of the essential phonemic contrasts found in Mixean languages, they would be able to do little more with them than to sound out each other’s written documents. One of their reports compares Mixe variation to Spanish variation (Acunzo 1991: 178). They write: “Take Spanish for example. Is it pronounced the same everywhere that it is spoken? As we know, it is not. But it is written the same.”

This is not exactly a fair comparison, given that inter-intelligibility between the four main varieties of Mixe in Oaxaca is minimal at best. A more realistic comparison would place Mixe side-by-side with the Western or Iberian branch of the Romance language family.

Added to this, the membership of the task force subscribes to a very popular local discourse about linguistic differentiation. It holds that before the Spanish arrived all Mixes understood each other and spoke the same way, that the present state of affairs is the result of continual efforts by the Spaniards, the missionaries, the Mexican government and other foreign interests to divide and eventually conquer the Mixes. For a group of people who take enormous pride in being known as la gente jamás conquistada ‘the unconquered

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10 Acunzo (1991: 169). Original text:

Nuestra lucha por cinco siglos
Los bosques y demás riquezas son nuestros
Sabemos como estar unidos
Nuestra lengua no es difícil escribirla
Somos un Pueblo con futuro. No lo olvidemos

people’ linguistic diversity poses a serious threat, a problem that must be overcome.\footnote{Unfortunately this story about the origins of dialectal diversity in indigenous Mexican languages has been accepted and promulgated by several influential Mexican sociolinguists despite the lack of any evidence supporting such claims. The irony, of course, is that the intensity of local linguistic variation encountered by the Spanish was one of the factors that made the Mixe region so difficult to invade and exploit.}

On the other hand, the people who have been working on the unified Mixe alphabet have been quite keen to take advantage of the Spanish literacy of its intended users and to design an orthographic system that will be consistent with Spanish spelling rules whenever possible. In this respect they are responding to widespread concerns that Mixe is just too difficult to write. “Difficulty” in this instance is a measure of relative distance from the norms of written Spanish.

Several participants in the Mixe alphabet task force are simply offended by the idea that Totontepecanos get to have extra symbols that no one else uses. It clashes with their notion that the best unified alphabet ought to have the fewest number of letters. In order to keep their \(<\text{o}>\), the Totontepecano members of the task force even capitulated to the demand that they use the letter \(<\text{b}>\) to represent both /b/ and /v/. They were willing to sacrifice \(<\text{v}>\) in order to preserve their \(<\text{o}>\). The latter has become such a stereotypical feature of Totontepecano speech that it was deemed to be too important to give up.

5. The Catch-22

For Totontepecanos, the crux of the problem is this: Their local form of Mixe, by virtue of its divergent pronunciation, stands accused of being the kind of Mixe most heavily influenced by contact with the Spanish. At the same time, its florid vowel system makes it the kind of Mixe that sounds the least like Spanish and fits most awkwardly into the procrustean bed of Spanish spelling.

Back at home, the Totontepecano members of the task force have met with significant local resistance to their proposals. The two most commonly voiced objections are - predictably - that it looks too complicated (from the perspective of a Spanish reader/writer) and that it makes too many concessions to other Mixe communities. In August 2002, for example, I visited with a prominent Totontepecano official, and the first thing that he wanted to ask me about was Mixe spelling. As far as he was concerned, the most recent alphabetical edicts seemed like a step in the wrong direction. He still could not fathom why extra letters were needed at all to represent certain vowel sounds. This man was, among other things, an avid francophile, and he announced to me that in place of \(<\text{o}>\) he wanted to propose the digraph \(<\text{ou}>\) or perhaps \(<\text{eu}>\). This was not just an idle remark, because this individual had the power to raise the issue at a town assembly, and put his orthographic counter-proposals to a vote.

Because the official Mixe orthography is better adapted to the phonology and
grammar of South Highland Mixe, recent initiatives to foment Mixe literacy in Southern Highland communities have been yielding encouraging results (for details see BICAP 2001). This cannot be said for Totontepec and the Northern Highlands. The current climate is such that would-be Totontepecanos authors are reluctant to write anything down in Mixe at all because they worry that the spelling rules will change yet again and render their text obsolete. And even though Totontepecano parents appreciate the idea of teaching Mixe reading and writing in local schools, they are reluctant to waste scarce educational resources on something so tenuous. More frustrating still, this lag is being taken as further evidence of Totontepec’s assimilationist tendencies and relative lack of interest in Mixe language and culture. The harder that Totontepec’s representatives work to find compromises in the name of Mixe unity, the more difficult it has become for them to express that vision in print.

References


