

Nahuatl Across Borders (El Náhuatl Cruzando Fronteras)

*Organized by the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the
School of International Relations and Pacific Studies (IR/PS)*

Summary

On April 4, the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies (USMEX) hosted a one-day symposium titled “Nahuatl across Borders,” with scholars, community leaders and activists from the United States and Mexico. The purpose of the conference was to promote collaboration and knowledge exchange between those who work with the development and revitalization of the indigenous Nahuatl language in Mexico and those who work on similar issues in the U.S.

More than a million people in Mexico speak Nahuatl, but in many Nahua communities youth no longer learn the language, which has been marginalized by the Mexican state and education system throughout the past century. In the U.S., Nahuatl is spoken by thousands of people, some of whom are recent migrants from indigenous communities and others born in the U.S. who study the language as a second language to connect with their ancestral ethnic roots.

Nahuatl was the language spoken by the Aztec empire and figures prominently as a trope of symbolic imagery within the Chicano and “Mexicayotl” movements in the U.S. In the past 20 years, many educational initiatives aimed at teaching Nahuatl as a heritage language have taken place in the U.S., and since the introduction of the Mexican Law of Indigenous Linguistic Rights in 2003, many similar projects are taking place in Mexico.

Among the participants in the conference was Carlos Octavo Sandoval who teaches Nahuatl and is carrying out a Nahuatlization project at the Intercultural University of Veracruz in Tequila, Veracruz. He visited with two Nahuatl speaking students, Gabriela Citlahua and Esteban de la Cruz. Sandoval spoke about the project he is carrying out, and the causes of language shift in the Zongolica region. He pointed out that the Nahua people of the Zongolica region are not historically Mexica (or Aztecs), but rather consider themselves historically related to the Nonoalca Nahua group who were the enemies of the Mexica from the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. He also argued that given the inadequate government support for language revitalization it was up to Nahuatl speaking communities themselves to take the process of linguistic normalization into their own hands by using the Nahuatl language in contexts where it has come to be marginalized, such as in the university, in the cities and in public places. The students, talked about their experience as Nahuatl speakers in the Mexican education system, which still discriminates against indigenous languages and their speakers.



From the U.S., among the participants were two representatives from the Academia Semillas del Pueblo, a charter school in Los Angeles where students of all age groups are taught Nahuatl language and culture. Félix Evodio “Tata” Cuaxtle, spoke about his pedagogical work using music as a way to teach U.S. born children of Mexican heritage the Nahuatl language, and executive director of the academy Marcos Aguilar spoke about the difficulties the school has faced as one of a small number of charter schools in the U.S. that teaches indigenous languages. David Vázquez, a Nahuatl teacher and court interpreter of Nahuatl from Santa Ana, spoke about his work as a teacher of Nahuatl to Santa Ana residents over the past 25 years. And, Lupe Lopez of Alianza Indígena spoke about her organization’s work preparing and certifying court interpreters for indigenous Mexican languages.

Other papers were presented by students and activists studying and teaching Nahuatl as part of the Mexicayotl movement, including papers critiquing aspects of the movement’s use of Nahuatl concepts, and describing new pedagogical methods for the teaching of Nahuatl as a second language.

The conference opened the possibility of future collaboration between educators and activists working with the indigenous language in U.S. and Mexico.

Agenda | Saturday, April 4, 2015

9 – 9:30 am **Welcome and Breakfast**

9:30 – 12:00 pm **Workshops**

I. Nahua Language, Culture and Tradition

Venue: IR/PS Gardner Room

“The Connection between Nahuatl and Identity within the Mexicayotl and Chicano Movements” | **Robert Gloria**

“Nahua Music and Ritual in Huasteca, Veracruzana” | **Veronica Pacheco**

“Finding Tiahui” | **Samuel Tecpaocelotl Castillo**

“Towards a New Mexicayotl” | **Kurly Tlapoyawa**

“Reaprendiendo Mi Mexicano: Mi Lengua, Mi Historia” | **Velma V. Calvario Tlahuancapa**

“Classical Nahuatl Literature as a Source of Contemporary Ceremonial Actualization and Revitalization” | **Cueزالin Rios**



II. Nahuatl and Education

Venue: IR/PS Dean's Conference Room

"Community Language Teaching: Nahuatl Language Learning Can Be As Fun as Danza Azteca" | **John Garcia**

"Usando el Nahuatl en la UVI, Veracruz" | **Esteban de la Cruz Flores**

"Usando el Nahuatl en la UVI, Veracruz" | **Gabriela Citlahua Zepahua**

"Nahuatl en la Academia Semillas del Pueblo" | **Marcos Aguilar and Felix Evodio Cuaxtle**

"Enseñando Nahuatl en Santa Ana, California 1989-2015" | **David Vazquez**

"Ma Yoli Tonenepil" | **Chris Cuauhtli**

12:00 – 1:30 pm

Lunch

1:30 – 3:30 pm

Keynote Paper Presentations

1:30 – 2 pm: "El náhuatl de las Altas Montañas de Veracruz: estrategias de rescate y fortalecimiento de un idioma vivo" (Totlahtol itech weweyi tepemeh Veracruz: tekintl pampa tikchikawaltiskeh se tlahtol yoltok)

Carlos Octavio Sandoval, Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural

2 – 2:30 pm: "Kalmekak - international inquiry, promotion and regeneration of Nahuatl Mexicano" ("Kalmekak - indagacion, promocion y regeneracion internacional del Nahuatl Mexicano")

Felix Evodio Cuaxtle and Marcos Aguilar, Academia Semillas del Pueblo

2:30 – 3 pm: "Lo que hemos hecho en Santa Ana desde 1989"

David Vazquez, Court interpreter and temachtiani Nahuatl

3 – 3:30 pm: "Nahuatl in the Californian Legal System"

Lupe Lopez, Alianza Indigena

3:30 – 4:30 pm

Closing Remarks and Conversation