

Amith, Jonathan D., ed. 2009. *Ok nemi totlahtōl. Vol. 1: Estado de Guerrero*. México: Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas.

As is the case with many indigenous American languages, Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, has been in slow decline since the sixteenth century. Outside of certain areas of Mexico, students and scholars of Nahuatl have limited access to native-language linguistic production. For those interested in the colonial period there are a number of published sources such as the Sahagun's *Florentine Codex* and *Psalmodia Christiana*, John Bierhorst's editions of Chimalpahin's *Codex Chimalpopoca* and the collections of Nahuatl poetry appearing in *Cantares mexicanos* and *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain*, James Lockhart's *Tlaxcalan Actas*, Caterina Pizzigoni's *Testaments of Toluca*, and a several others. These publications provide a relatively extensive corpus of texts that can serve as the basis of both ethnographic and linguistic research. Texts in modern Nahuatl, however, are much more difficult to come by, because the literate tradition promoted by Catholic priests in the colonial period gradually disappeared. And audio recordings are even more uncommon. In recent years, both Jonathan Amith and John Sullivan have begun respective revitalization projects that help address this problem. It is important to point out, however, that the primary goal of these projects is not to provide material for academic research but rather to create or revive a literate and intellectual tradition perpetuated by native speakers of the language for their own purposes, including the production of knowledge in Nahuatl. Sullivan's project, a major dimension of which has been the production of a monolingual dictionary of Huastecan Nahuatl, attempts to create the tools and the context necessary to promote the use of Nahuatl in all the same contexts as any other modern language. Amith's revitalization efforts, on the other hand, while also producing a dictionary and a grammar, appear to be directed toward promoting literacy in order to reinforce more traditional uses of the language. Nevertheless, both projects are consciously aware of the way in which they also further academic research by non-native speakers of Nahuatl. The work under review here is a product of Amith's revitalization project and consists of a set of CDs containing oral narratives in Nahuatl from the state of Guerrero and an accompanying volume containing transcriptions of the narratives with an introduction in Spanish explaining the linguistic features of each variant of Nahuatl represented in the collection.

In terms of evaluating an academic publication, the work carried out by Amith is an invaluable contribution to the field of Nahua studies. In the transcriptions, Amith employs a modern orthography that includes "w" and "k" rather than the more common "hu," "c," and "qu" derived from Spanish orthographic conventions. For those who work primarily with Classical Nahuatl as recorded in colonial documents, this makes the written language difficult to read, but this is merely a question of becoming accustomed to these conventions. As authentic cultural products, there is little more to say about the folk tales recorded electronically and transcribed into alphabetic script. The fact that this publication makes available audio recordings and written transcriptions of authentic Nahuatl linguistic production makes it an invaluable resource for those interested in the language and culture.

One of the explicit purposes of this publication, as explained in the introduction, is to preserve native oral traditions. I cannot comment on the specific way in which this type of publication contributes to the revitalization of modern Nahuatl. From both academic and political perspectives, it raises various issues: the extent to which the project is actively promoting an educational literacy program as opposed to merely documenting grammar, vocabulary, and oral discourses; the implications of introducing written traditions into what has been primarily an oral context; the way in which the recording of these narratives influenced the nature of the oral discourse; and so forth. Insofar as these materials are designed for the native speakers involved in the revitalization efforts to which they contribute, a treatment of such issues may not be necessary. But the linguistic discussion presented in the introduction is much more specialized than what would be expected for the general audience of

native speakers to which it is explicitly directed. It is unlikely that whatever educational program is involved in the revitalization efforts will include linguistic training in detailed phonology and morphology of the language. The academic nature of the introduction and the fact that it was submitted to be reviewed for an academic audience implies that these materials are not intended solely for the native speakers of the Balsas Valley in Guerrero.

At the same time, for a specialized audience the linguistic discussion does not seem as thorough or as rigorous as the subject demands. For example, Amith does not thoroughly explain the principle that informs the orthographic system that he uses. The second and largest section of the introduction is titled “Fonémica y ortografía empleadas en esta edición” [Phonemics and Orthography Used in this Edition]. It might seem pedantic to point out that this title implicitly treats phonemics, which is inherent in the language, as if it were a matter of choice similar to orthography, which is strictly conventional: as if one could “use” a different phonemics if one chose to do so. But the implication in the title is not merely a linguistic infelicity. Throughout this section, there is a strange confusion between orthographic conventions, phonemics, and even morphology.

Amith’s discussion of phonemes illustrates the point. First, for those unfamiliar with linguistic conventions I should point out that linguists normally use slashes “/” to indicate phonemes, brackets “[]” to signal allophones (the phonetic realization of phonemes), braces “{ }” to indicate morphemes, which are units of meaning rather than sound, and quotation marks “” to indicate orthography. The section on phonemes consists primarily of two tables representing consonants and vowels respectively. But Amith also includes a discussion of a few of the phonemes that merit some commentary. For example, he identifies what he calls a “labialized labial occlusive” (normally referred to by linguists as a “rounded labial occlusive”) phoneme /pw/, which he explains only appears in a few words as a result of the loss of a short vowel between /p/ and /w/. The problem here is that if an elision of a vowel occurs between the two phonemes /p/ and /w/, it does not produce a new phoneme. The first reference to this “phoneme” actually appears to recognize this by representing it as /pw/ rather than /p^w/ with superscript “w.” But later in the same paragraph it shows up as /p^w/ with the superscript without acknowledging the difference. If one accepts the validity of the difference between an underlying cognitive system of phonemics and its surface realization as phonetics, then even based on Amith’s own description it would appear that what he identifies as the phoneme /pw/ or /p^w/ is actually the phonetic realization [pw] of an underlying sequence of phonemes /pow/, or /pw/ with the elision of the /o/.

The same problem characterizes the discussion of vowels. Amith states for example: “Un cambio importante que afecta la escritura ocurre en el náhuatl de Ameyaltepec, donde la vocal media anterior /o/ se sube a /u/ en ciertos casos (por ejemplo, después de /k/)” [An important change that affects writing occurs in the Nahuatl of Ameyaltepec, where the mid front vowel /o/ rises to /u/ in certain cases (for example, after /k/)] (6). Leaving aside the fact that /o/ is a back vowel rather than a front vowel, this statement again confuses phonemics and phonetics. What Amith appears to be describing is a phoneme /o/ that has at least two allophones: [o] and [u].

This problem is evident in the discussion of /h/ as well: “En cada forma de hablar en esta antología, a menudo una /h/ es resultado de la modificación de otras consonantes que cambian a /h/ en un contexto particular” [In each way of speaking in this anthology, often an /h/ is the result of the modification of other consonants that change to /h/ in a particular context]. Here again, if we are talking about surface changes, the /h/ to which Amith refers is not a phoneme but rather an allophone [h] of a number of different phonemes.

In his discussion of the /o/ and the /u/ [sic], Amith goes on to explain that “La necesidad de utilizar la grafía /u/ para representar la vocal [u] es una de las varias razones que motivaron el empleo de /w/ para la aproximante (semivocal) [w]” [The necessity of using the grapheme /u/ to represent the vowel [u] is one of the various reasons that motivated the use of the /w/ for the approximant

(semivowel) [w])(6). Of course, /u/ is not a grapheme but rather a phoneme. It is unclear here the extent to which the erroneous use of the slashes “/” to indicate graphemes rather than phonemes reflects a conceptual or merely a conventional confusion. The confusion of linguistic concepts and conventions makes it difficult to know for sure exactly what Amith means; but his description also appears to indicate that the orthographic system attempts to be phonetic rather than phonemic, because the graphemes are representing allophones ([u] and [w]) rather than phonemes.

The next subsection titled “Alfabeto y ortografía práctica” clarifies this further: “en la mayoría de los casos, las grafías utilizadas en la escritura práctica son las mismas que se usan en la representación fonética” [In most cases, the graphemes used in practical writing are the same that are used in the phonetic representation] (6). And this is consistent with an orthography that is linked to phonetic production rather than the underlying phonemic structure. But later on, in a section dealing with /w/ and /u/, he states the opposite: “Nótese que en el sistema ortográfico empleado aquí se usa siempre la misma grafía para el mismo fonema” [Note that in the orthographic system employed here the same grapheme is always used for the same phoneme] (10). The first statement indicating that the graphemes reflect phonetic production rather than the underlying phonemic system confirms the primarily phonetic (or at least allophonic) nature of the orthography; and the second statement constitutes a contradiction in that it claims that the orthography is phonemic. The decision to employ a phonetic orthography, by which I mean one that attempts to represent allophones as opposed to phonemes, may be based on the preferences of the native speakers with whom Amith worked. With reference to the /o/-/u/ [sic] issue, for example, he explains that the speakers from Ameyaltepec prefer to write the [u] with the letter “u.” The problem here is not that the orthographic system is phonetic rather than phonemic. Rather, the emphasis on phonetics appears to cause a conceptual confusion with regard to the linguistic concepts of phoneme, grapheme, allophone, and as we will see, even morpheme. The linguistic description in Amith’s introduction misrepresents the concepts of phoneme and morpheme and ignores the concept of allophone.

While Amith does not acknowledge explicitly the problem posed by the blurring of the difference between phonemes and allophones, his description of consonants avoids the issue while creating a new problem by shifting from phonemes to morphemes. In the discussion of /h/, for example, the description curiously begins to talk in terms of a phonetic realization of morphemes rather than phonemes. It states, for example, that the expression “ōh’tek” [you cut it] results from the morphemic sequence {ō + t + ø + teki + ø}. The point here is that the first consonant in any sequence of two identical consonants is pronounced [h], although this is represented as a phoneme /h/. There are at least two problems with this statement. First, the morphemic analysis is erroneous. It should read “{ō + ti + ø + teki + ø}. The second person subject pronoun is {ti} not simply {t}. The surface [t] that conveys this morpheme is the result of a phonological process in which the [i] is elided. Furthermore, the phonetic transformations that this example illustrates do not operate on morphemes. They operate on phonemes. In other words, the morphemic sequence given by Amith is not what produces the transformation of the consonant, in this case /t/ into an [h]. Rather, the sequence of two identical phonemes is what triggers the transformation.

The conflation of morphemes and phonemes is particularly clear in a footnote to this discussion: “En Ozomatlán, la secuencia {kk} se reduce a /k/. Esto es, la primera /k/ se elimina y no se realiza como /h/, como ocurre en Oapan y Ameyaltepec” [In Ozomatlán, the sequence {kk} is reduced to /k/. That is to say that the first /k/ is eliminated and is not realized as /h/, as occurs in Oapan and Ameyaltepec] (7). First, the sequence in question here is not morphemic as suggested by the use of braces “{kk}”; it is phonemic. Second the reduction operates on the phonetic rather than the phonemic level. The more appropriate way to describe this phenomenon would be to say that the phonemic sequence /kk/ results in [k]. Amith goes on to explain several other transformations in the same terms,

as if the phonemes in question transform into completely different phonemes. This problem persists throughout the entire introduction.

Part of the difficulty in discussing these issues is that the linguistic description misidentifies the entities to which it refers. It appears that this confusion results at least in part from the absence of the concept of allophone in the analysis. The description conflates phonemes and allophones, because it does not appear to have recourse to the conceptual distinction that differentiates them. And this conflation creates a problem, because it results in an inability to refer to the underlying phonemic system. At some level, there seems to be an awareness of this problem, because the analysis attempts to compensate for this lack by employing an idiosyncratic concept of morpheme that exhibits features of both morphemes and phonemes. In other words, given that the understanding of a phoneme here is more like an allophone, the description resorts to the concept of morpheme in order to refer to the deep structure of the phonemic system.

I have a hard time following some of the other descriptions in the section on phonemics and orthography. It is difficult to tell whether this difficulty derives from the confusing nature of the explanation or the limitations of my own knowledge of linguistics. But given the misunderstandings that characterize the phonetic cum phonemic cum morphological analysis, readers should be cautious in accepting them at face value.

The third section of the introduction deals with prefixes, suffixes, and emphatic pronouns and the fourth section presents a list of the unique features of the Nahuatl from each of the areas represented in the book. The same conflation of phonemes and allophones is evident here, but the primarily morphological nature of the discussion makes it less confusing. And the general information conveyed is informative. Nevertheless, the misunderstanding of linguistic concepts leaves the reader wondering if the same lack of rigor extends to other aspects of the author's analysis.

The transcriptions that occupy the majority of the book are exactly that: transcriptions of an oral discourse with all that this entails. In other words, these texts do not so much contribute to the formation of an independent literate tradition as they do document an oral one. This is not a criticism. Again, it is unclear exactly what role such texts will play in Amith's revitalization project. For linguists, the close relationship between the audio recording and the transcription is more useful than an edition employing the more consistent and regular conventions of written language without the incomplete sentences, partial repetitions, and other features of oral discourse. But it is unclear how this type of transcription might contribute to the revitalization of a Nahuatl written tradition.

In any case, even with all the shortcomings of the introduction, the materials that Amith has made available in this volume along with its accompanying CDs are well worth the effort to acquire them. This publication is titled "Volume 1" of what Amith hopes will be a long series of additional collections of such oral texts and their transcriptions. Furthermore, he has made his original recordings available through the Archive of Indigenous Languages of Latin America at the University of Texas. The preservation of these materials will insure their availability for generations to come.

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