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## The *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*: A Model for Interdisciplinary Multicultural Collaboration

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**N**ahuatl, one of the world's indigenous languages, is facing serious threats to its survival. Unjust rural land use patterns, the lure of perceived urban employment opportunities, and lingering colonial prejudices are but some of the factors contributing to the rapid loss of the Nahuatl language in highland central Mexico today. Classical Nahuatl, as it was written and spoken until about 1800, is already extinct. At the end of the eighteenth century native scribes and notaries who were proficient in written Nahuatl had shifted to the use of written Spanish, the language of the colonizers. Nahuatl became an oral language, and fewer and fewer Nahua individuals were able to read the thousands of manuscripts written in Nahuatl (using the Roman alphabet, after about 1540) their forebears had left on archive shelves. The *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* project proposes a resource to help reverse these trends: a reference for modern Nahuas and other interested parties to gain access to the indigenous language, Classical and modern, for self-education or other scholarly purposes.

This trilingual dictionary project (Nahuatl, Spanish, and English) has many facets. It involves the participation of an institute in Zacatecas, Mexico, where John Sullivan, a teacher of Spanish and Nahuatl recruits Nahua university students from the Huasteca region. These students receive training in written Nahuatl (Classical and modern) and Spanish and collaborate in the building of the dictionary, entering terms from their current, everyday speech. They are also entering sixteenth and seventeenth-century Nahuatl vocabularies compiled by Spanish priests and their informants, entering them into the dictionary database. Finally, they are taking courses in cultural history, paleography, and linguistics, which help prepare them for their Classical Nahuatl manuscript studies.

The plan is to obtain funding (we have applied for the NEH/NSF grant Documenting Endangered Languages) to underwrite a larger number of scholarships, to expand the student body and diversify it, inviting the participation of Nahuas from additional regions. This, in turn, will diversify the dictionary base, with vocabulary, pronunciation variations, and broadening perspectives from places such as the modern state of Guerrero. It will also help spread a Nahuatl literacy movement to different parts of the country. It will prepare more people to better understand their histories by studying manuscripts from their communities of the past. These various students will not be consultants or human subjects but rather full participants in the project.

The dictionary project also involves the participation of ethnohistorians at the University of Oregon, Stephanie Wood and Robert Haskett, who have training in Classical Nahuatl. Wood and Haskett have considerable experience translating manuscripts and have access to additional colleagues working in the same field. They are selecting terminology and contextual information from recent manuscript translations and are adding this material to the dictionary, with full citations that will point philologists back to the original sources. They enter terms just as they find them in the original manuscripts, capturing a range of orthographic variation, but they also include in the database any known standardized versions to facilitate the greatest possible success for searching. (Because of the diverse ways of writing Nahuatl, we often lack a single lemma that all would agree upon as a universal dictionary form.) Wood and Sullivan will also be adding a linguistically marked-up rendition of each word, showing vowel length and glottal stops, for instance, in order to facilitate linguists' searches and research needs. They will follow the markup used in Frances Karttunen's *Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (1983).

Sullivan, Wood, and Haskett will work together, in consultation with linguists such as Frances Karttunen, Johnathan Amith, and other colleagues in Mexico, to ensure that the English and Spanish-language search interfaces for the dictionary will meet the interests of multiple disciplines. Luis Reyes García, who recently passed away, was a model Nahua scholar who led translation workshops in Mexico City and Tlaxcala that we wish to emulate. One of his students, Raul Macuil, and another Nahua college graduate, Ignacio Silva Cruz, in Mexico City, are ready to help us test our materials. Sullivan and Wood will open up dialogue between the student and faculty groups and encourage a growing appreciation for what each is contributing. Sullivan will additionally guide the Nahua students in building the Nahuatl-language search interface.

The Nahuatl interface will be accessible from the trilingual dictionary home page but it will also work as a stand-alone site, as a monolingual dictionary aimed at modern speakers. The intent is to encourage written literacy and to document current

vocabularies and word meanings. It will help modern speakers recapture terms from Classical Nahuatl that have been lost, whether this might result in an expanded vocabulary in modern-day usage or only an aid to help with translating cultural heritage materials. Although there will be an emphasis on the written language, the Nahuatl portion of the dictionary will nevertheless offer users access to audio files, as well. Sound recordings will serve to preserve and document regional differences in pronunciation and provide access to vision-impaired users and to those who are still building their literacy.

As we are proposing it, the Online Nahuatl Dictionary project offers a unique model for interdisciplinary work that will help preserve an endangered indigenous language and, at the same time, create some of the tools needed for the analysis of neglected cultural heritage materials. It will bring together modern language consultants with linguists and ethnohistorians of various cultures (Spanish-speaking and English-speaking, to start) to document a rapidly disappearing language, reinstate a lost literacy for Nahuas, and establish a methodology for international and cross-cultural collaboration in both dictionary creation and manuscript transcription, translation, and analysis.

Our project has created an online environment for this international collaboration, allowing native students to work with native and non-native professors in building a multifaceted reference database of the Nahuatl Language. This resource can then be leveraged to provide features that will serve the participants' multiple purposes while simultaneously forging a relationship of greater equality and respect. A key tool to help facilitate this 'data collection' effort is the most recent version of *FileMaker Pro* (Version 7.0) and its 'instant web publishing' functionality. This technology gives us not only the flexibility to allow any of the project participants to remotely enter data, but also enables us to create various database interfaces on the fly from anywhere via the internet. With the collaborative nature of our project, this ability to alter the database and the various interfaces through which different audiences interact with it is crucial to addressing the needs of all the participants. In addition, the use of this technology saves us the cost of purchasing multiple database licenses, helps ensure the validity of the data by having just one 'collection point' for information and eases regular data backup. Furthermore, *FileMaker Pro 7.0* supports the use of Unicode, facilitating the typing of special characters that are so essential for written Nahuatl and Spanish and handles audio files easily, allowing sound to be uploaded from various locations.

Because the *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* is in the developmental phase, our presentation for the ACH/ALLC will highlight our goals and explore our intended methodology. We will appreciate and benefit from suggestions from the audience. We see our approach as unique in the way it combines linguistic with

humanities uses, in a distance research environment, to build a lexicon that will document and preserve an endangered language and help resurrect the voices of an extinct language.

## Bibliography

Karttunen, Frances. *Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983.