Challenges to the Study of Variation in Colonial Poqom (Mayan)

Poqomchi' and Poqomam are two Mayan languages of east central Guatemala, collectively known as Poqom. Modern Poqomchi' and Poqomam are very close but show dialectal variation in all areas of grammar (Malchic Nicolás et al. 2000). Following the Spanish conquest of Guatemala in the 1500s, Dominican priests created grammars, dictionaries, and doctrinal works in Poqomam and Poqomchi' as tools for teaching Christianity. These sources provide a wealth of data about dialectal variation in the colonial period. In this paper, I show that several of the key features that distinguish Poqom varieties from one another were already present in the colonial manuscripts. I also discuss challenges with using these sources and possible routes forward.

The colonial Poqom corpus comprises about 2,000 manuscript pages, dating from the 16th-18th centuries. The bulk is found in three volumes of Poqomchi' sermons from the 17th century, totaling over 1,500 pages. There are also dictionaries, grammars, and shorter doctrinal works. Finally, the *Título del Barrio de Santa Ana* from 1565 (Sapper 1906), the record of a displaced Poqomchi' community, is the only colonial Poqom source written by native speakers. Most of the manuscripts are not transcribed or translated, precluding quantitative analysis; prior work on phonology, aspect, and contact (Campbell 1977: 125; Vinogradov 2019b, 2020, 2021b) has relied on isolated examples. This case study is similarly qualitative but illustrates areas where a full searchable corpus would provide greater clarity and new avenues of research.

Several isoglosses of modern Poqom varieties are found in the colonial manuscripts. Western Poqomchi' and Poqomam underwent a sporadic change *b', *p>p';* Campbell (1978) suggests based on geography that this change predated the Conquest. One colonial sermon uses the word <npuzric> *np'usrik* 'it is folded' with the innovative *p'.* Plural particle *taq* in modern Poqomchi' is reduced to *ta* in Poqomam (Malchic Nicolás et al. 2000); colonial documents in both languages already show this difference. In Poqomchi', the 2nd person absolutive prefix is *at-* in completive aspect and *ti-* elsewhere; Poqomam levels it to *ti-* everywhere (Ibid.). Colonial Poqomam used primarily *ti-* in completive forms, indicating that the leveling was well underway.

Beyond the transcription bottleneck, there are challenges in interpreting the corpus for diachronic research. First, some manuscripts have unclear provenance, making it difficult to pinpoint their linguistic features in space and time. These manuscripts still have useful data, but their place in the historical picture must be interpreted in light of sources with a known date of composition. Second, because colonial Poqom post-dates Spanish contact, it already shows influence from Spanish; this is most evident in loanwords and religious coinages but may extend to grammar. This constrains our ability to reconstruct pre-contact Poqom forms, but raises other research questions: when did authors coin new Poqom terms instead of using loanwords (e.g., Vinogradov 2021a)? Does the degree of Spanish influence vary over time or by author?

Finally, because Spanish priests authored most of the manuscripts, the corpus does not show the full range of variation among native speakers of Poqom. This has a linguistic and a social element. Where there is linguistic variation, it could be difficult to distinguish variation in the speech community from learner error on the part of the priests. The 17th-century copyist of one sermon collection noted a stark difference between the two authors' command of Poqomchi', which he claimed would be obvious to the reader (Viana, Ximeno, and Zúñiga [c. 1600]). On the sociolinguistic side, nearly all the texts are missionary works; even the colonial linguistic descriptions were written to serve this end (Vinogradov 2019a). The 1565 *Título,* the only text by native speakers and in a different genre, may be a fruitful point of comparison. Further work is required to construct a full searchable corpus and explore these topics in more depth.

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