Liturgy and Language Change: Translated ritual speech in Colonial Poqom
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This paper showcases translations of Catholic ritual speech that appear in Colonial Poqom manuscripts and highlights their value for studying language change in Poqom. Dominican friars working in Poqomchi' and Poqomam Mayan (collectively "Poqom") communities of central Guatemala produced numerous translations of Latin religious documents, as well as original sermons. Amid this nearly 3,000-page corpus, there are many examples of ritual speech: prayers such as the Lord's Prayer and Ave Maria, and other liturgical texts such as the Apostles' Creed and Ten Commandments. Each of the above appears in two or more manuscripts, allowing comparison across time.

Liturgical texts have some advantages for studying language change. First, they are based on widely known Latin source texts, giving us an anchor point to translate and gloss the Poqom text. Second, we have multiple exemplars across the corpus, from 1741 to 1875, spanning from the late colonial to the early modern period in Guatemala. Some texts, such as the Lord's Prayer, appear in an even older published grammar sketch of Poqomam (Gage 1648) and in modern Bible translations (Bible Society of Guatemala 2016). Third, because liturgy is formulaic, it is easier to control for individual variation. In naturalistic texts, linguistic variation could arise from differences in topic or individual style. Because the content of the liturgy is fixed, discrepancies more likely reflect a genuine change in the language, though we cannot rule out individual differences between translators. The translation of religious texts may itself have been a vehicle for language change in Poqom (Vinogradov 2022, cf. Hanks 2010 on the role of novel religious vocabulary in Yucatec Maya).

There are several challenges to studying language change through liturgy. First, these texts are short; to "use all the data" from the rest of the corpus (Lauersdorf 2018) would yield a much more robust account of variation across time. Second, ritual speech often includes archaic elements, just as many modern English speakers still recite the Lord's Prayer from the 1611 King James Bible ("Our Father, which art in heaven..."). Third, it is unclear how fluent in Poqom the authors were; many were not native speakers. Finally, because these texts are translated from widely used Latin sources, we cannot assume the Poqom translations are all in the same manuscript tradition; a later text might be a wholesale re-translation of the Latin original, rather than merely an update of the older translation. This would still provide evidence of variation and change, but not as strongly as direct transmission.

This case study focuses on the definite article i and the future proclitic $a=$ in Colonial Poqomchi' liturgy. Future $a=$ appears in the oldest versions of the prayers and becomes less common over time, until modern Poqomchi' where $a=$ is obsolete. (1a-b) shows parallel passages separated by about 100 years, one with $a=$ and the other without. In contrast, the definite article i is absent from the oldest texts but becomes more common in the early modern period (as in 2a-b); the article is ubiquitous in modern Poqomchi'. Some other differences among the texts do not seem to represent language change: variation in word order (placing a modifier before or after the verb as shown in 1a-b) or specific word choice. The overall wording of the Poqomchi' texts is similar, and minor changes that appear in one text generally show up in all the later texts, suggesting that they do represent a continuous manuscript tradition (and are not just independent re-translations from Latin).

Analyzing variation and change in ritual speech can supplement (though not replace) a study of the full Colonial Poqom corpus. Studying short, multiply attested liturgical texts can help generate hypotheses about language change, which can become topics for a corpus search. Moreover, these translated liturgies themselves raise sociolinguistic questions: What role did these texts play in the community, and how were they passed on? What decisions did the colonial translators make when translating from Latin to Poqom, and what does this tell us about the structure (or their perceptions of the structure) of the language? Future research in the Colonial Poqom corpus can answer these and more questions.

Examples

(1) a. <**A**chayeutah Ɛque yunac eƐal eƐal Ɛava>
         a=ch-a-ye-w   taj   q-eh   yu'naak eqal eqal   qa-wa'
         FUT=IMP-ERG.2SG-give-AP   IRR   ERG.3PL-to   today   daily   ERG.3PL-food
         'Give us this day our daily bread' ("Sermonario" [1775-1825], folio 218 *recto*)

     b. <Ca ua ecal ecal cha yeu tah que yunac>
         qa-wa'   eqal eqal   ch-a-ye-w   taj   q-eh   yu'naak
         ERG.3PL-food   daily   IMP-ERG.2SG-give-AP   IRR   ERG.3PL-to   today
         'Give us this day our daily bread' (Villacorta 1875, folio 3 *recto*)

(2) a. <xahinah racun Dios>
         xa   jinaj   r-ak'uun   Dios
         only   one   ERG.3SG-son   God
         'the only Son of God' ("Sermonario" [1775-1825], folio 235 *verso*)

     b. <xahinan [sic] racun **y** Dios>
         xa   jinaj   r-ak'uun   **i**   Dios
         only   one   ERG.3SG-son   **the**   God
         'the only Son of God' (Villacorta 1875, folio 4 *recto*)

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